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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Top officials pushing for war powers

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — High-profile members of the Obama administration told Congress on Wednesday that its proposed war authorization would allow the U.S. military to fight Islamic State militants and its allies in Africa and elsewhere, but would not allow for support of proxy forces in Syria, the heart of the campaign.

The testimony by Secretary of State John Kerry, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was aimed at shoring up support for the administration's Authorization for Use of Military Force, but also highlighted what many lawmakers perceive as shortcomings in the draft authorization, which would guide a new global war against the Islamist extremists for the next three years.

Appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry called on Congress to approve President Barack Obama's war powers request. "Our nation is strongest when we act together, and we simply cannot allow this collection of

murderers and thugs to achieve its ambitions," Kerry said, noting that the Islamic State militant group has captured land in Iraq and Syria threatening "the death or submission of all who oppose it" and "the incitement of terrorist acts across the globe."

The administration's requests for a new authorization has been foundering on Capitol Hill due to doubts on both sides of the aisle over the geographic scope, time frame and whether U.S. ground forces might be used. Foreign Relations Committee chairman Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., called the hearing Wednesday to gauge whether any legislation is possible, saying "we don't know of a single Democrat" who supports the current proposal.

Corker asked Dempsey whether the proposed authorization for the use of military force provides military support for moderate Syrian rebel groups that will be trained and equipped to fight the Islamic State as part of a key strategic offensive approved by Congress last year. The training is set to begin this month.

"The answer to that is, 'no,'"

Dempsey said. "The administration has not added a Syrian regime or an Assad component to the AUMF."

Dempsey, who has backed the proposed war authorization, said the U.S. offensive will likely need to adapt and change tactics over time. He said the main war effort is focused on the Islamic State in Iraq because the U.S. has a credible ally with ground forces.

"We don't have that credible partner inside Syria yet," he said. "We are making efforts to build that partner."

Corker said the United States has a moral obligation to help protect any proxy force, which will almost certainly face aerial bombing by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad once they take the battlefield.

"So, the president has actually sent us an AUMF that does not protect them from what is coming down the road. I think that is somewhat odd," he said.

Committee ranking member Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., noted that the Nigerian terror group Boko Haram, responsible for thousands of deaths and attacks on civilians, announced its allegiance to the Islamic

State. He asked the administration officials if the U.S. could attack the group under the proposed authorization.

Carter said the White House is requesting wide flexibility to fight the Islamic State, even as it aligns and morphs into other groups around the globe.

He said such groups could be attacked if they meet two requirements — they must pledge allegiance to the Islamic State and pose a direct threat to the United States.

The war of airstrikes and coalition offensives against the Islamic State has been waged since August and President Barack Obama has said he has the legal power to continue without an OK from Congress. But the administration hopes to gird the effort and reassure international partners through an authorization vote.

The White House proposal bars the large-scale "enduring" U.S. ground combat of the type waged in Iraq and Afghanistan, and would sunset in three years, allowing the next administration and Congress to revisit the legislation.

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11 presumed dead in Fla. Black Hawk crash

The Associated Press

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. — Human remains washed ashore in heavy fog Wednesday after seven Marines and four soldiers were believed to be killed in an Army helicopter crash during a nighttime training mission off a Florida beach.

All 11 servicemembers aboard the Army National Guard's UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter were presumed dead, according to a Pentagon official

who spoke with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity for lack of authority to discuss the incident publicly.

Kim Urr, 62, who works at the Navarre Beach campground near where the helicopter went down, said she heard a strange sound followed by two explosions around 8:30 p.m. Tuesday.

"It sounded like something metal either being hit or falling over, that's what it sounded like. And there were two booms

afterward, similar to what you hear with ordnance booms, but more muffled," Urr said.

Despite the presumption of death and the discovery of human remains, the military still considers it a rescue mission, said Sara Vidoni, a military spokeswoman for Eglin Air Force Base, outside Pensacola.

Fog reduced visibility to less than 2 miles when the copter went missing Tuesday night, according to the National Weather

Service, and it remained so heavy Wednesday morning that search boats just offshore could be heard but not seen, blasting horns as their crews peered into the water.

The Marines were part of a special operations group based in Camp Lejeune, N.C. The National Guard soldiers were from a unit based in Hammond, La. None was immediately identified so that families could be told first.

Clinton defends her Cabinet email setup

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The message from Hillary Rodham Clinton: Trust me. But in a 21-minute news conference to address why she used a private email account as secretary of state, the favorite for the Democratic

ANALYSIS

Party's presidential nomination in 2016 did little to try to build that trust among those willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Granted, that may be a thin slice of America. Few people inspire more clear-cut devotion and antipathy than the former first lady, senator and diplomat. Still, as she nears the launch

of her presidential campaign, Clinton might have used the occasion to reach out, to make a special effort to refute claims that she's overly secretive and legalistically clever.

For instance, she might have taken up the suggestion of Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus, who demanded Clinton ask a neutral arbiter to review the contents of her private email server.

But Clinton didn't. She remained poised before a pack of reporters, giving no ground. The server will remain private. She said she had exercised her right to decide which of roughly 60,000 emails at issue were work-related and which con-

cerned personal topics. She deleted and did not archive those in the second group, she said.

In hindsight, she said, "it might have been smarter" to have used both a government email account and a personal account while secretary of state. At the time, she said, "it didn't seem like an issue." But she went on to defend her use of a private email server stored at her home, saying it was initially set up for the office of her husband, Bill, who served as president.

"I fully complied by every rule I was governed by," she said. The public, she said, must trust that she properly culled government emails from private and irrelevant messages.

Firing squads returning to Utah?

The Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah, the only state in the past 40 years to carry out a death sentence by firing squad, is poised to bring back the Old West-style executions if the state cannot track down drugs used in lethal injections.

The Republican-controlled state Legislature gave final approval to the proposal Tuesday night, with lawmakers billing it as a backup plan.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, a Republican, has declined to say if he'll approve the bill, a decision that's not expected to come for a week or so. If he approves the measure, Utah would become the only state to allow an execution by firing squad if there's a drug shortage.

Utah is one of several states to seek out new forms of capital punishment after a botched lethal injection in Oklahoma last year and one in Arizona that took nearly two hours for the condemned man to die. Legislation to allow firing squads has been introduced in Arkansas this year. In Wyoming, a measure to allow firing squads if the lethal drugs aren't available died.

In Utah, the bill's sponsor, Republican Rep. Paul Ray, of Clearfield, has touted the measure as being a more humane form of execution. He argued that a team of trained marksmen is faster than the drawn-out deaths that have occurred in botched lethal injections.

Opponents, however, say firing squads are a cruel holdover from the state's Wild West days and will earn the state international condemnation.

NATO: Ukraine monitors need more access

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

MONS, Belgium — A fragile cease-fire in eastern Ukraine appears to be holding, but international monitors must be allowed to observe where Russia-backed separatists are taking weapons they are removing from the front, top NATO officials said Wednesday.

"We have seen the withdrawal of some heavy weapons, but it's unclear what's the destination of the weapons that have been withdrawn," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters. "And it's important

that this withdrawal of heavy weapons is complete and that it is verifiable."

There are concerns, he said, that separatists could be repositioning those weapons for future use.

Concerns that Ukrainian forces lack the materiel to counter the advanced weaponry NATO officials say Russia has delivered to the separatists have led to calls on the Obama administration to provide Ukrainian forces with lethal defensive weapons.

In a call with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Vice President Joe Biden on Wednes-

day said the U.S. would provide "additional nonlethal U.S. security assistance to Ukraine," according to a White House statement.

The Associated Press, citing unnamed U.S. officials, said the aid would include some hand-launched surveillance drone systems, 30 heavy armored Humvees, 200 additional Humvees and countermortar radar.

That stops short of sending lethal defensive equipment, such as anti-armor missile systems, which some former Obama administration officials have said Ukrainian forces need.

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S. Korean airline sued in 'nut rage' case

The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — A flight attendant who says she was living her dream by working for Korean Air is suing the airline and its infamous "nut rage" executive, claiming the bizarre onboard tantrum ruined her career.

Kim Do Hee, the flight attendant, is seeking compensation through a trial in New York city after she was verbally

and physically attacked by Korean Air heiress Cho Hyun-ah, according to a statement on Wednesday by two American law firms, the Weinstein Law Firm and Kobre & Kim.

Cho, a vice president overseeing cabin service at the time of the Dec. 5 incident, was enraged that Kim, 27, served her macadamia nuts in a bag, not on a dish.

After a heated confrontation with crew in the first class

cabin, Cho ordered head flight attendant Park Chang-jin off the plane, forcing it to return to a gate at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

It is the first civil lawsuit connected with the case. Last month a South Korean court sentenced Cho, 40, to one year in prison for violating aviation security laws, using violence against a flight attendant and other charges.

Big moves mark free agency

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NFL's business season began with a bang. Several, actually: trades, retirements and, yes, even some big free-agent moves.

It wasn't until mid-evening Tuesday that the first huge star took advantage of free agency: Darrelle Revis returning to the Jets for five years and \$70 million.

There were plenty of moves beforehand involving frequent All-Pros. But they were in the form of trades or leaving the sport altogether.

Monster deals sent Saints tight end Jimmy Graham to Seattle and Rams quarterback Sam Bradford to Philadelphia. San Francisco linebacker Patrick Willis, plagued by sore feet, announced his retirement. So did injury-prone QB Jake Locker of the Titans, who spent just four seasons in the league.

The biggest shocker was the Graham deal, which sent Seahawks center Max Unger to New Orleans, along with a first-round draft pick. Seattle also got a fourth-rounder.

Not quite so stunning but certainly newsworthy was St. Louis sending Bradford, the top overall draft pick in

2010, to the Eagles for quarterback Nick Foles.

Philadelphia also added Seahawks starting cornerback Byron Maxwell as a free agent with a six-year deal. And Seattle brought in cornerback Cary Williams, formerly of the Eagles and a 2012 Super Bowl winner with the Ravens.

Several other trades became official Tuesday.

Baltimore dealt nose tackle Haloti Ngata to Detroit, which is about to lose All-Pro defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh in free agency. Ngata, 31 and a five-time Pro Bowler, is due \$8.5 million next season and has a \$16 million salary cap figure.

The Bills confirmed acquiring McCoy for linebacker Kiko Alonso; McCoy also signed a contract extension for \$40 million over five years.

The Jets also confirmed a previously agreed upon trade, getting receiver Brandon Marshall from Chicago for a fifth-round draft pick. They released WR-KR Percy Harvin, whom they acquired last season from Seattle.

Also Tuesday:

- Carolina released DeAngelo Williams, its career rushing leader.
- Frank Gore, the 49ers' career rushing

leader, joined the Colts as a free agent. But the 49ers added WR Torrey Smith.

- Linebacker A.J. Hawk, who grew up in Ohio and attended Ohio State, agreed to terms with Cincinnati on a two-year deal. Hawk spent his first nine seasons in Green Bay.

- Jacksonville, with lots of salary cap room, grabbed tight end Julius Thomas away from Denver among a slew of moves. The Jaguars agreed to deals with defensive end Jared Odrick, right tackle Jerme Parnell, cornerback Davon House, linebacker Dan Skuta and safety Sergio Brown. Thomas agreed on a five-year deal worth \$46 million, with \$24 million guaranteed.

- Arizona got probably the best run blocker in this year's group, guard Mike Lupati, who agreed on a five-year, \$40 million contract with \$22.5 million guaranteed. The Cardinals also re-signed linebacker LaMarr Woodley.

- Atlanta fortified the middle of new coach Dan Quinn's defense by signing free-agent linebackers Brooks Reed and Justin Durant.

- Oakland added LB Malcolm Smith, the 2014 Super Bowl MVP with Seattle, and RB Roy Helu.

Tampa outlasts Montreal

The Associated Press

MONTREAL — Canadiens goaltender Carey Price put on another show but it just wasn't quite enough to beat the Tampa Bay Lightning.

About a minute into overtime, Tyler Johnson beat the NHL's leader in nearly every goaltending statistic to lift the Lightning to a 1-0 win Tuesday night in a battle between Eastern Conference leaders.

Johnson picked up his own rebound and saw the puck go in off defenseman Tom Gilbert's skate to end the high-paced matchup.

"They got a puck toward the net and they got a lucky bounce," said Price. "We had a guy trying to do the job in front and it was just a tough break."

The point Montreal (42-18-7) got for the OT loss kept it atop the Atlantic Division, one ahead of Tampa Bay (42-20-6) with a game in hand. The Canadiens tied Nashville and Anaheim at a league-leading 91 points, and have a game on both.

Ben Bishop secured his third shutout of the season as Tampa Bay earned its fourth straight victory.

The Bolts have owned the Canadiens this season, winning their three meetings by a combined 12-3 margin. They face each other twice more this month. Montreal swept Tampa Bay in the first round of the playoffs last spring.

Rangers 2, Islanders 1: Rick Nash scored a deflected goal to break a tie 2:50 into the third period as the visiting Rangers won the battle of New York teams in their last regular-season visit to Nassau Coliseum.

Bruins 3, Senators 1: Ryan Spooner scored his second and third goals of the season and Tuukka Rask celebrated his 28th birthday by stopping 39 shots to help lead visiting Boston to the win.

Blues 5, Jets 4: Barret Jackman scored his first goal in 36 games with 1:03 left, launching a shot from center ice to give host St. Louis the win.

Kings 5, Avalanche 2: Brayden McNabb had a goal and two assists and Jonathan Quick stopped 21 shots as visiting Los Angeles ended Colorado's three-game winning streak.

Stars 2, Flyers 1: Vernon Fiddler scored the go-ahead goal late in the third period to lift visiting Dallas over Philadelphia.

Blue Jackets 4, Hurricanes 3: Ryan Johansen had the only goal in the shootout, giving visiting Columbus the win.

Wild 6, Devils 2: Thomas Vanek scored twice and Devan Dubnyk stopped 30 shots as host Minnesota beat New Jersey.

Leonard, Spurs hold off rally by Raptors

The Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Kawhi Leonard had 24 points, 11 rebounds and matched a career high with five steals, and San Antonio withstood a second-half let-down to beat Toronto 117-107 for its sixth straight victory.

Tony Parker added 23 points and nine assists, and Danny Green was 5-for-6 on three-pointers in scoring 19 points for San Antonio.

Toronto lost its fourth straight despite 32 points from Kyle Lowry and 21 for DeMar DeRozan. Amir Johnson had 16 points and 14 rebounds.

Tim Duncan made the game's first basket on a follow of his own blocked shot 19 seconds in, after failing to make a field goal for the first time in his career in San Antonio's previous game. He finished with 12 points and 13 rebounds in 36 minutes before leaving with about a minute remaining, clutching his elbow after teammate Tiago Splitter fell into him under the basket.

Pacers 118, Magic 86: Reserve Rodney Stuckey had 34 points, six rebounds and seven assists, and host Indiana beat Orlando for its sixth straight victory.

Damjan Rudez scored 17 points, and Luis Scola added 15 points and 10 rebounds for the surging Pacers (29-34), who moved into sole possession of seventh place in the Eastern Conference.

Tobias Harris had 22 points and six rebounds, and Elfrid Payton finished with 14 points for the Magic, who have lost five of seven games.

Stuckey made two of his career-best six three-pointers in an 18-0 run in the first

half. Indiana used a 9-3 run in the fourth quarter to pull away, with Solomon Hill's two-handed dunk to give the Pacers a 93-73 lead with 9:52 remaining.

Pelicans 111, Nets 91: Alexis Ajinca and Quincy Pondexter each scored 17 points and New Orleans moved within percentage points of eighth place in the Western Conference by beating host Brooklyn.

Omer Asik had 12 points and 15 rebounds for the Pelicans in their third straight victory. Anthony Davis scored 15 points, a night after tying his career high with 43 in a win at Milwaukee.

Brook Lopez had 15 points and nine rebounds for the Nets, who broke to an early double-digit lead before losing their fourth straight.

Ajinca had 11 points during a four-minute stretch of the second quarter as the Pelicans took a 55-46 lead into halftime. They are 2 percentage points behind Oklahoma City for the West's final playoff spot.

Jazz 87, Knicks 82: Derrick Favors had 29 points and 12 rebounds, and Utah beat visiting New York to tie a season high with its third straight victory.

Both teams struggled to score as the Jazz were without leading scorer Gordon Hayward (back) and the Knicks have been injury-plagued all season. New York missed Tim Hardaway Jr. (back) for the second consecutive game.

Reserve Rodney Hood scored 17 points for the Jazz, while Rudy Gobert added 10 points, 14 rebounds, four blocks and three steals. Hood and Favors carried the offensive load in the fourth after the Knicks took a two-point lead.

Alexey Shved scored 21 points and had a career-high 10 rebounds for the Knicks. Andrea Bargnani finished with 20 points.

Lakers 93, Pistons 85: Jordan Hill led six teammates in double figures with 16 points, and host Los Angeles beat Detroit to snap a five-game losing streak.

The injury-riddled Lakers (17-46) beat the Pistons for the 11th time in the last 12 meetings behind 46 points in the paint and a 46-41 rebounding edge, but were officially eliminated from playoff contention before their game ended when New Orleans beat Brooklyn.

Greg Monroe had 24 points and nine rebounds for the Pistons, but missed a pair of critical free throws with 1:09 remaining and Detroit trailing by three. Andre Drummond had 21 rebounds along with 14 points, but couldn't prevent Detroit's seventh straight loss.

Cavaliers 127, Mavericks 94: Even without his trademark headband, LeBron James had 27 points and took over sole possession of the franchise career assists record as visiting Cleveland beat Dallas.

James was one of four players with more than 20 points for the Central Division-leading Cavaliers, who have won 12 of their last 13 games against Western Conference opponents and broke a 14-game losing streak in Texas.

Kyrie Irving scored 22 points, while Kevin Love had 21 points and 14 rebounds. J.R. Smith also scored 21 points and Timofey Mozgov, the other starter, had 17.

Chandler Parsons led Dallas with 18 points, while Monta Ellis had 17 and Amare Stoudemire 15. Dirk Nowitzki scored 13 points on only 3-for-10 shooting.



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Gonzaga claims WCC crown

The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Gonzaga's players were like blurs up the floor, whipping passes, filling lanes, dropping in three-pointers as their fans roared with each highlight.

These Zags are fun to watch — and hard to catch once they get out front.

Kyle Wiltjer had 18 points and 10 rebounds, and No. 7 Gonzaga shot its way past Brigham Young 91-75 Tuesday night for the Zags' third straight West Coast Conference tournament title.

"We want to play them fast and can score with the best of them," said Wiltjer, the tournament MVP. "We wanted to just push the pace and did that."

Gonzaga (32-2), the regular-season champion, clinched its 14th WCC tournament by putting on an offensive show in an entertaining rematch of last year's title game.

The nation's best-shooting team during the regular season, the Bulldogs hit 53 percent inside Orleans Arena and made 8 of 12 from three-point range.

Kevin Pangos had 16 points and five assists while orchestrating an efficient Gonzaga offense that had 15 assists and six turnovers.

Domantas Sabonis and Gary Bell Jr. added 15 points each for the Zags, who are expecting a high seed when the NCAA Tournament selections are announced on

Sunday.

BYU (25-9) tried to match the Zags shot for shot behind Kyle Collinsworth, but never quite caught them after Gonzaga went on an early second-half run to build a 12-point lead.

Collinsworth finished with 28 points, eight rebounds and five assists after posting a triple-double in the semifinals.

Tyler Haws added 15 points for the Cougars, who have to endure an agonizing wait until Selection Sunday for the second straight season.

The Zags have become a staple in the WCC title game, making their 18th straight appearance.

ND State claims Summit's NCAA bid

The Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. — North Dakota State appeared to take control of the game with a big run midway through the second half. However, the Bison had to fend off South Dakota State's surge down the stretch to earn a return trip to the NCAA tournament.

Lawrence Alexander scored 16 of his 25 points in the second half to help North Dakota State hold on for a 57-56 win Tuesday night to take the Summit League tournament title and an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament.

After cutting a nine-point deficit to one in the final minute, the Jackrabbits fouled Alexander with 8 seconds remaining and he missed the front end of a 1-and-1, giving South Dakota State a final shot. However, George Marshall's three-point attempt was wide left.

A.J. Jacobson added 12 points and eight rebounds for the Bison (23-9), who advanced to the NCAA tournament for the third time in school history. Last year, they beat Oklahoma in their first game.

Cody Larson scored 19 points to lead the Jackrabbits (23-10), and Deondre Parks added 13 points and six rebounds.

The Bison had a 17-4 run in the second half and led by nine with just over 6 minutes remaining. However, the Jackrabbits rallied to pull within one in the final minute. South Dakota State had a chance to take its first lead since the 11:11 mark, but George Marshall's shot was blocked out of bounds with 8 seconds remaining.

Robert Morris surges to NEC title

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Three times in his previous four seasons coach Andy Toole took Robert Morris to the Northeastern Conference tournament finals, and three times the Colonials had to watch their opponents cut down the nets and celebrate an NCAA bid.

In front of a raucous crowd, packed tightly into one of the smallest gyms in Division I, Toole and his team never wilted. No more waiting until next year for the Colonials.

Rodney Pryor sparked a second-half surge and Robert Morris denied St. Francis, Brooklyn, its first NCAA tournament bid, beating the Terriers 66-63 for Northeast Conference championship on Tuesday night.

The top-seeded Terriers (23-11) had a chance to tie with 2.4 seconds left when

Tyreek Jewell, who scored 19 points and was their best player on this night, went to the line after being fouled shooting a desperation three-pointer.

Jewell missed the first, back-ending the shot and then the second. He intentionally missed the last one, but Robert Morris got the ball back and was quickly fouled. Lucky Jones missed a free throw that would have sealed it and Lowell Ulmer's heave from beyond half-court hit the back of the rim, took a high bounce and then missed again.

It was Robert Morris and their fans celebrating as the SFC crowd lamented the Terriers' third NEC title game loss, but first since 2003. St. Francis is one of just five original Division I teams, dating back to 1948, that has never made the NCAA tournament.

As NEC regular season champions, the Terriers get an NIT bid, their first post-

season appearance since they went to the NIT in 1963.

"They can look back at a regular-season title. A lot of personal accolades. And postseason in the NIT for the first time in 52 years," St. Francis coach Glenn Braica said. "I think that's pretty good. I think a lot of guys in this country would like to have that."

Second-seeded Robert Morris (19-15) is going back to the tournament for the first time since 2010.

Pryor finished with 17 points and earned tournament MVP honors.

Glenn Sanabria of St. Francis made a long three from straight on with 16.2 seconds left to cut Robert Morris' lead to 64-63.

Point guard Brent Jones went to the line and swished both free throws with 13.8 seconds remaining to make it a three-point game for Robert Morris.

After Kentucky, 3 top seeds remain

The Associated Press

Conference tournaments will give the nation's best teams opportunities to boost their credentials to claim one of the four No. 1 seeds in the NCAA Tournament.

There is one big, blue exception. Unbeaten Kentucky has virtually locked up a top seed no matter what happens in the Southeastern Conference tourney this week in Nashville. The unanimous No. 1 team in the Top 25, the Wildcats are looking to become just the eighth squad to stay atop the poll wire to wire.

After Kentucky, ACC powers Virginia and Duke appear to be in good shape for top seeds, though an early slip in the conference tournament for either might cloud the outlook.

Much will depend on what happens with other contenders during this frenzied week in college basketball. Villanova, Arizona and Wisconsin are among teams that could improve their résumés for a top seed — even though some coaches aren't ready to look ahead to Selection Sunday.

A look at candidates for No. 1 seeds:
Big blue lock
Kentucky (31-0, 18-0). RPI, 1; Strength of schedule, 26:
 The only surprise here would be if the

Wildcats are not the No. 1 overall seed come Sunday.

ACC powers
Duke (28-3, 15-3). RPI, 5; Strength of schedule, 12:
 Winners of 11 straight, the Blue Devils could lock up a top seed by winning the ACC tournament.

Virginia (28-2, 16-2). RPI, 6; Strength of schedule, 22:
 See Duke, above. The Cavaliers and Blue Devils are 1-2 in the ACC tournament. If the bracket holds through Saturday's championship game, it may be just a matter of which team ends up atop which NCAA region. The South region final is in Houston; the East region final is in Syracuse.

Go West
 That leaves the West, where the regional final will be held in Los Angeles. Each contender likely needs to win its league tournament to have the best shot at a No. 1 seed. Teams listed in order of Top 25 ranking:

Villanova (29-2, 16-2). RPI, 3; Strength of schedule, 27:
 Wildcats could assure themselves of defining top seed by taking Big East tourney crown in New York. Unbeaten in six Top 25 games.

Arizona (28-3, 16-2 Pac-12). RPI, 7; Strength of schedule, 34:
 Getting to final in league tourney and beating third-seeded Utah, which has a better RPI and strength of schedule than second-seeded Oregon, would help.

Wisconsin (28-3, 16-2 Big Ten). RPI, 4; Strength of schedule, 11:
 Likely lock for No. 2 seed. If they don't get a top seed, the Badgers could face being placed in the Midwest as the second seed to Kentucky. That could set up a potential rematch of last year's Final Four game won by the Wildcats, 74-73, in a regional final to be played in Big Ten country.

Gonzaga (30-2, 17-1 West Coast). RPI, 8; Strength of schedule, 81:
 A loss to BYU on Feb. 28 left Gonzaga needing the most help among potential No. 1 seeds. Likely needs to have other contenders lose early.

Kansas (24-7, 13-5 Big 12). RPI, 2, Strength of schedule, 1:
 Jayhawks are 3-3 since Feb. 16 going into the conference tourney as Big 12's top seed. Like Gonzaga, Kansas needs help to move up a seed line in the NCAAs, though a tougher schedule may give Jayhawks more consideration.

Crusaders earn berth

The Associated Press

VALPARAISO, Ind. — Valparaiso fought off key injuries all season, so the adversity the Crusaders faced Monday didn't faze them.

Trailing 39-31 with 11:43 left in the Horizon League tournament championship, they picked up their defensive intensity to spark a 15-0 run and beat Green Bay 54-44 and earn an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament.

"It's been quite a ride this season," said Alec Peters, who scored nine points and was named tournament MVP. "Being conference champs, tournament champs and now going to the NCAA Tournament. We just had to bear down, play some defense and get some stops because we wanted this more than anything."

Peters had an off game with 3 of 13 shooting, including 1-for-8 from the three-point line. David Skara led the Crusaders (28-5) with 12 points and E. Victor Nickerson added 11 as Valparaiso earned the conference's regular season championship and won its second conference tournament title in the past three years.

Keifer Sykes led Green Bay (24-8) with 14 points on 5-for-15 shooting. He came in averaging 29 points in the Phoenix's past three games, all wins.