

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Gunmen dress as doctors, kill 30 in Kabul

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Gunmen dressed as doctors stormed Afghanistan's largest military hospital on Wednesday, killing more than 30 people and wounding dozens more, officials and witnesses said.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack on Sardar Dawood Khan hospital, which is near the U.S. Embassy in Kabul's diplomatic area.

Defense Ministry spokesman Gen. Dawlat Waziri said a suicide bomber blew himself up at the southern gate of the facility, after which a small group of attackers dressed in hospital uniforms entered with guns and began shooting.

"Our forces landed on the roof of the hospital from helicopters and were bravely

fighting the enemies," Waziri said.

Clashes between the militants and security forces were still underway hours later.

As the fighting dragged on, a second explosion was heard from within the building. By late afternoon, more than 30 people — including soldiers, doctors and civilians — had been killed, in addition to all four gunmen, Waziri said.

Ismail Kawoosi, a Health Ministry spokesman, said 66 injured people were rushed to two other nearby hospitals for treatment, some of them in critical condition.

"I was going to visit the children's hospital, which is across from Sardar Dawood Khan hospital, when suddenly I heard a blast and shooting started," said Said Sardarwali, a Kabul resident. He said the attackers were wearing white doctors'

gowns.

The NATO-led international military coalition said on Twitter: "Once again insurgents show complete disrespect for humanity by attacking a hospital. We stand ready to assist Afghan security services."

The attack came one week after a pair of Taliban suicide bombings targeted Afghan security forces in Kabul, killing at least 16 people.

U.S. troops have been helping the Afghans battle the Islamic State group in eastern Afghanistan since early last year. U.S. and Afghan forces describe their fight against the militants as a success, saying they've reduced numbers from between 2,000 and 3,000 a year ago to some 700 today.

Zubair Babakarkhail contributed to this report.

Army eyes new bases in European theater

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Army is scouting locations in Germany for potentially basing more soldiers in Europe, where a post-Cold War period of military downsizing is undergoing a reappraisal.

A team from U.S. Army Europe recently visited two military facilities in northern Germany, a region without a current U.S. military presence, the Army said.

"The purpose was to assess the sites if there was growth in permanently assigned U.S. Forces in Germany," USAREUR said in a statement. "At this time no decisions have been made; we are engaged in prudent planning only."

The downsizing of the Army in Europe had been steady after the end of the Cold War, but Russia's intervention in Ukraine has prompted the Pentagon to reconsider its force structure on the Continent.

German officials have taken note of USAREUR's site visits in the towns of Fallingbommel and Bergen, relatively rural areas with nearby training ranges and about 100 miles from the port of Bremerhaven, a key logistical node for the Army. They said they were told by the Army that it was considering putting as many as 4,000 soldiers in northern Germany.

These are "preliminary considerations," German parliamentarian Henning Otte told the *Cellesche Zeitung*, a local newspaper.

USAREUR did not provide details about the type of force mix it was seeking to potentially accommodate, emphasizing no decisions have been made. Instead, the Army is planning for various scenarios.

If the Army moved more troops to Europe — 4,000 soldiers are roughly the size of a brigade combat team — the Army would still be smaller than it was five years ago, when USAREUR had four brigades

on the Continent.

Today, there are only two brigades — the Vilseck, Germany-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment and the 173rd Airborne Brigade out of Vicenza, Italy.

Retired Gen. Carter Ham, who heads the Association of the U.S. Army, said in a report issued last year that the Army should consider relocating a third brigade to Europe. Ham recently reiterated that point.

"The global security environment has changed since it was decided in the mid-2000s to base the U.S. Army primarily in the continental U.S. It is no longer clear the U.S. has the ability to deploy sufficient land power quickly enough to prevail against emerging threats," Ham wrote in a March 3 editorial published by *Defense One*.

Any decision to base more forces in Europe would require the backing of President Donald Trump, who has called for more investment in the military while emphasizing a desire for closer relations with Russia.

The Army has sought to offset its smaller number of permanently stationed soldiers in Europe — roughly 30,000 — with rotational troops. In January, the Army deployed the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, to Europe as part of a plan to ensure the year-round presence of a tank brigade.

After nine months, the unit will be replaced by another rotational force.

In recent weeks, an Army combat aviation brigade also arrived in Europe on a rotational basis to take part in operations along NATO's eastern flank.

The deployments are part of the ongoing Operation Atlantic Resolve, which involves larger exercises and more forces mobilized in places such as the Baltics and Poland. The intent is to reassure allies nervous about a more aggressive Russia and to deter any possible military adventurism from Moscow.

China urges US to make deal with North Korea

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — If China was hoping for a concession from the U.S. after recently suspending coal imports from cash-poor North Korea, it got the opposite.

The U.S. is starting to deploy a missile defense system in South Korea that the allies say is needed to defend against North Korea. But China and North Korea view it as a threat.

That adds to strains in the high-stakes relationship between Washington and Beijing weeks into Donald Trump's presidency. It could further complicate cooperation between the two world powers in combating something they both oppose — North Korea's nuclear program.

The U.S. military said Tuesday it has started bringing in equipment for the deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense system, or THAAD. The announcement came after North Korea on Monday launched four ballistic missiles into the ocean off Japan — a show of force in response to annual U.S.-South Korean military drills. The allies say they are routine but Pyongyang views them as rehearsal for an invasion.

China has already exerted pressure on some South Korean commercial interests, but it remains unclear how the deployment will affect ties with Washington, which insists China is not targeted by THAAD. U.S.-based experts say that Chinese concerns are exaggerated, if not entirely unwarranted.

China proposed Wednesday that North Korea could suspend its nuclear and missile activities in exchange for a halt in joint military drills conducted by the U.S. and South Korea.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in Beijing that the "suspension-for-suspension can help us break out of the security dilemma and bring the parties back to the negotiating table."

Commandant addresses photos

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The sharing of nude photos of female Marines by active and veteran Marines on a secret social media page is "embarrassing to the Corps," the service's top general said in a video released Tuesday.

Gen. Robert Neller, the Marines commandant, warned "true warriors" do not engage in such activity.

"What we say and do each day represents who we are," Neller said in the video posted on the Marines' official website. "There is no time off for Marines. We are all-in 24/7, and if that commitment to excellence interferes with your me-time or if you can't or are unwilling to commit to contributing 100 percent to our Corps' warfighting ability by being a good teammate and improving cohesion and trust then I have to ask you, 'Do you really want to be a Marine?'"

In the roughly four-minute video, the camouflage-clad

Neller speaks directly into the camera, publicly addressing for the first time allegations that some Marines had secretly shared private photos — some nude — of female Marines and personal information about the women in a Facebook group. Those allegations were brought to light over the weekend in a report by the nonprofit Center for Investigative Reporting with the War Horse military news website.

That report cited a private Facebook group titled Marines United in which a secret drive had been circulated that contained the explicit photographs, dossiers on the female service-members and degrading comments that included apparent threats of rape, according to the report.

Defenders of the group, which according to the report had 30,000 members, have said on social media, including on Stars and Stripes' Facebook page, that Marines United had helped veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal thoughts.

But Neller said there is no excuse for anyone involved in the scandal who "acted selfishly and unprofessionally."

"So let me cut to the chase — when I hear allegations of Marines denigrating their fellow Marines, I don't think such behavior is that of true warriors or warfighters," he said.

The Naval Criminal Investigative Service has opened an investigation into the allegations and the Marines United Facebook page and associated photographs have been taken down, according to the Marines.

In his video, Neller encouraged anyone who believes they were victimized or subjected to harassment via social media or other forms to report those offenses, and he reminded more senior Marines to protect victims from retaliation and to "do all in your power to prevent harassment or abuse of any Marine or sailor."

Corps explains, defends subdued response

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The sergeant major of the Marine Corps said Wednesday that the service has toned down its response to a nude photo-sharing scandal because it could impede an investigation and prosecution.

Sgt. Maj. Ronald Green told a House panel that comments by the service's former commandant in reaction to widespread sexual assault in 2012 was rebuked by the judicial system as counterproductive and the Marines are concerned strong statements could again complicate the scandal.

A private Facebook group with 30,000 members is under investigation by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service for reports that it posted nude

and compromising photos of female Marines that sometimes included their names, rank and duty stations.

Gen. Robert Neller, the Marine Corps commandant, released a video statement Tuesday calling the revelation embarrassing and a violation of the service's values, though the statement steered clear of addressing potential sexual assault or the details of the growing scandal.

"I understand everyone wants us to come out and be outraged and we are outraged," Green said.

But he also said the service has weighed a statement from a judge who criticized the earlier condemnation of sexual assault by then-Commandant Gen. James Amos, who sparked questions of unlawful com-

mand influence after criticizing the lack of convictions and Marine discharges amid what many called an epidemic of the crimes in the military.

"There are some things we'd like to say but due to the legal situation when he (Amos) came out and he made bold statements about how he felt about sexual assault, the judicial system said that the statements he made could actually have a negative impact on where they wanted to go with the prosecution," Green said.

The Marine Corps has not received any details from the investigation of a computer hard drive for the Marines United Facebook page such as how many of the 30,000 members had an active-duty status, Green told a House Appropriations subcommittee.

WikiLeaks says CIA program targets TVs, smartphones

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Maybe the CIA is spying on you through your television set after all.

Documents released by WikiLeaks allege a CIA surveillance program that targets everyday gadgets ranging from smart TVs to smartphones to cars. Such snooping, WikiLeaks said, could turn some of those devices into recorders of everyday conversations — and could also circumvent data-scrambling encryption on communications apps such as Facebook's WhatsApp.

WikiLeaks is, for now, withholding details on the specific hacks used “until a consensus emerges” on the nature of the CIA's program and how the methods should be “analyzed, disarmed and published.” But WikiLeaks — a nonprofit that routinely publishes confidential documents, frequently from government sources — claims that the data and documents it obtained reveal a broad program to bypass security measures on everyday products.

If true, the disclosure could spark new privacy tensions between the government and the technology industry. Relations have been fraught since 2013, when former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden disclosed secret NSA surveillance of phone and digital communications.

Just last year, the two sides feuded over the FBI's calls for Apple to rewrite its operating sys-

tem so agents could break into the locked iPhone used by one of the San Bernardino, Calif., attackers. The FBI ultimately broke into the phone with the help of an outside party; the agency has disclosed neither the party nor the nature of the vulnerability, preventing Apple from fixing it.

According to WikiLeaks, much of the CIA program centered on dozens of vulnerabilities it discovered but didn't disclose to the gadget makers. Common practice calls for government agencies to disclose flaws to companies privately so they could fix them.

Instead, WikiLeaks claims, the CIA held on to the knowledge to conduct a variety of attacks.

WikiLeaks claims the hacks allowed the CIA to collect audio and other messages from data-scrambling communication apps by intercepting data before it is encrypted or after it's decoded. The CIA didn't appear to compromise the apps, but rather the phone's underlying operating system.

WikiLeaks said the CIA had teams looking for vulnerabilities in iPhones and Android phones and also targeted tablets.

WikiLeaks also claims that the CIA worked with U.K. intelligence officials to turn microphones in Samsung smart TVs into listening devices. Other tools in the CIA's arsenal target PCs running Microsoft's Windows system, according to WikiLeaks, which says many of the attacks are in the form of viruses.

4 killed in Miss. when train hits tour bus

Associated Press

BILOXI, Miss. — A freight train crashed into a bus full of Texas tourists visiting Gulf Coast casinos, killing four in Biloxi, Miss.

Forty people were hurt, seven critically. The cause of the Tuesday afternoon crash remains under investigation.

Witnesses told Mississippi news outlets the bus appeared to have been stuck on the tracks when it was hit. The crossing is on a steep embankment and has a sign warning drivers that it has a low ground clearance.

Authorities on the scene said it took more than an hour to get everyone aboard the bus out of the wreckage. Two people had to be removed with metal-cutting equipment.

Jim DeLaCruz, a passenger who was in the back of the bus with his wife, told The Sun Herald that they were trying to get off. “The bus tried to clear the tracks and got stuck right in the middle and it couldn't budge, and the train just kept coming and kept coming,” he said.

Police Chief John Miller said he was unsure why the bus was stopped on the tracks.

Miller said the Echo Transportation bus had come from Austin, Texas, carrying passengers to one of Biloxi's eight casinos.

The names of the dead were not immediately released.

A witness told The Sun Herald that the bus was stuck on the tracks for about five minutes before he saw the train hit it. Mark Robinson said some people were getting off the bus as the driver tried to move it, and at least one person was shoved under the bus when the train hit.

A nearby car was used as a stepladder after the crash to get people off the bus, and emergency workers pulled passengers through windows.

Lady Liberty goes dark, Twitter lights up

The Washington Post

For more than an hour Tuesday night, a cloak of darkness covered Lady Liberty. Some of the lights that normally illuminate the statue went off before 11 p.m., leaving only her still-lit torch and crown visible to most in New York Harbor.

As one Twitter post opined, the timing was “just too perfect.” Definitely, tweeted another, “an ominous sign of the times.”

The near-blackout of the universal symbol of freedom was invested with great meaning on the Internet, with a consensus settling, more or less, on two interpretations.

Lady Liberty was either protesting President Donald Trump generally and more specifically

his travel ban just a day after he signed the revised executive order limiting entry to the U.S. from six Muslim-majority countries.

Or she was signaling her solidarity with #DayWithout-Woman, a strike, scheduled for Wednesday, that asks women to skip work to show the world what life would be like without them.

“Give me your tired your poor your huddled masses but later. We're closed,” one tweet said. Her lights were out because “Trump has plunged our country into darkness,” said another.

Perhaps when her lights came back on, her forearm would display a “Nevertheless, she persisted” tattoo, another tweet suggested.

Women's March, organizers of the “Day Without a Woman,” were quick to thank the statue for “standing with the resistance and going dark” for the event.

On the other hand, someone else suggested, perhaps Russian hackers were to blame.

Ultimately, the lights came back on at about midnight and the National Park Service, ever the spoiler, explained what might have happened, stressing that crews had not yet inspected the scene to establish a definitive cause.

The parks staff suspected the outage was related to ongoing work on a new emergency backup generator for Liberty Island, according to Jerry Willis, a public affairs officer for the NPS.

Malaysia: Fear repels kin of slain Kim

Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Malaysia's prime minister said Wednesday that relatives of the half brother of North Korea's ruler may be too scared to help police investigating his mysterious poisoning death in Kuala Lumpur. A man claiming to be the victim's son, meanwhile, appeared in an online video saying he and his family were safe in a location he did not reveal.

Prime Minister Najib Razak spoke a day after a stunning diplomatic breakdown involving the investigation into Kim Jong Nam's killing, with North

Korea barring Malaysians from leaving its territory and Malaysia responding in kind. While on Tuesday he denounced North Korea for "effectively holding our citizens hostage," Najib said Wednesday that his country still wants to negotiate.

"You must appreciate — I know you're hungry for news — but you must appreciate that this is a sensitive matter and that sometimes it's best conducted in secrecy so that we can achieve the desired result," Najib told reporters. He said Malaysians in North Korea are going about their lives normally, and he was

not worried about their safety.

Malaysian authorities have charged two women — one Indonesian, one Vietnamese — with murder for allegedly swiping Kim's face with VX nerve agent as he waited for a flight home to Macau on Feb. 13. He was dead within 20 minutes. Malaysia is seeking seven North Korean suspects, including an embassy official. The investigation has infuriated North Korea, which has dismissed the inquiry as politically motivated.

Najib also said authorities are still trying to get DNA samples from Kim's immediate family to

formally identify his body.

"Maybe they are scared to come forward," Najib said.

Kim Jong Nam had three children with two women living in Beijing and Macau. On Wednesday, an online video in which a man claiming to be his son Kim Han Sol said he, his mother and his sister were safe.

The man doesn't talk about his family's whereabouts or how they were being protected. The video was posted on the YouTube channel of Cheollima Civil Defense, which describes itself as a group helping North Korean defectors.

Women rally, strike to show impact on society

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — American women were staying home from work, zipping up their wallets, wearing red and attending rallies across the country to show their economic strength and impact on society as part of International Women's Day celebrations happening across the globe Wednesday.

"A Day Without a Woman" is the first major action by organizers of the Women's March since the day after President Donald Trump's inauguration, when millions of women poured into the streets in protest of misogyny, inequality and oppression.

The event coincided with the U.N.-designated International Women's Day. German airline Lufthansa had six all-female crews flying from several cities in the country to Berlin. Sweden's women's football team replaced the names on the back of their jerseys with tweets from Swedish women "who have struggled to gain ground in their respective field." Finland announced plans to create a \$160,000 International Gender Equality Prize. Women also held rallies in Tokyo and Madrid.

In the U.S., spokeswoman Cassidy Findlay said organizers for

"A Day Without a Woman" were inspired by the recent "Day Without an Immigrant" protests held last month. She said the action is aimed at highlighting the effect of women on the country's socio-economic system and demonstrating how the paid and unpaid work of women keeps households, communities and economies running.

Trump took to Twitter on Wednesday and asked followers to join him in "honoring the critical role of women" in the U.S. and around the world. He tweeted that he has "tremendous respect for women and the many roles they serve that are vital to the fabric of our society and our economy."

Unlike the Women's March, Wednesday's U.S. protests focus on the absence of women, who are being steered to local rallies and community groups and away from work or shopping in stores or online. Organizers also are asking women to wear red to signify love and sacrifice.

In New York, organizers planned a gathering in Central Park. International Women's Day rallies also were planned in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Washington and Berkeley, Calif.

Families mark 3 years since MH370 disappeared

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — The Australian government minister in charge of the suspended seabed search for the Malaysia Airlines jet told victims' families and friends at an anniversary church service on Wednesday that he remained hopeful that Flight 370 would be found.

"While to date we have been unsuccessful, we remain hopeful that at some stage in the future, there will be a breakthrough, the aircraft will be found, and we will be able to answer more of your questions," said Darren Chester, minister for infrastructure and transport.

The Malaysian government said that although Australia, Malaysia and China in January suspended the sonar search for the airliner after a sweep of 46,000 square miles of the Indian Ocean, "we remain ever hopeful that we will be able to find the answers we seek when the credible evidence becomes available."

Chester and Angus Houston, the former Australian defense chief who coordinated the early months of the search efforts, were among around 100 who attended the private ceremony at St. John's Anglican Cathedral in the east city of Brisbane to mark the third anniversary of the mys-

terious tragedy.

Several victims and relatives of the 239 passengers and crew aboard the Boeing 777, which flew far off course during a flight from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Beijing on March 8, 2014, live in or near Brisbane.

Chester told the congregation that searchers had tried their best to end the uncertainty surrounding the crash.

He also said that a memorial to the lost passengers and crew would be erected in the west coast city of Perth, which had been a base for Indian Ocean air and sea search crews.

Australia's prime minister at the time of the tragedy, Tony Abbott, said in a newspaper interview last month that areas north and south of the searched zone should also be examined.

A lawsuit filed in the United States on behalf of the families of 44 people on board Flight MH370 alleges a series of catastrophic electrical and other failures may have led to the crash.

The lawsuit, filed March 3 against Boeing in U.S. District Court in South Carolina, names seven malfunctions that could have led to the crew losing consciousness, the plane's transponder stopping its transmission and the plane flying undetected until it crashed after running out of fuel.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Holy cow! 2 calves found crammed in car

CA BEAUMONT — It was one of the more unusual calls the California Highway Patrol has received: Someone reported seeing a cow trying to climb out of a small car parked alongside an interstate.

Officers responding Saturday along a mountain pass in Southern California's Riverside County discovered a calf trying to escape from a Honda Civic's open trunk.

Another calf was crammed into the floor of the back seat. Both calves' hooves were tied.

Investigators said the driver was nowhere to be found. The car is registered to an address in Tulare County, more than 250 miles away.

Authorities said Monday the vehicle had not been reported stolen. It's been impounded as evidence.

The calves will be cared for at a ranch while officials try to determine who owns them.

Parking spot at garage on market for \$300K

NY NEW YORK — A parking space at a garage in Brooklyn is on the market for \$300,000.

NBC New York said the last one there sold for \$280,000.

A neighborhood resident, Julie Hollar, said the sky-high parking costs more than her parents paid for their house. Julia Kite, of the advocacy group Transportation Alternatives, said it's about the current price of a condo in another part of Brooklyn.

But it's the new normal since developers tore down a 300-space garage to build new

homes.

Karen Ratner said she paid more than \$100,000 for her spot a few years ago. There's just "no other parking available," she said.

Big rig overturns, spills 30K pounds of cat litter

PA READING — Police said a tractor-trailer spilled its load of more than 30,000 pounds of cat litter on a Pennsylvania roadway when it failed to manage a curve and overturned.

The northbound lanes of Route 222 were closed for five hours early Tuesday in Spring Township, near Reading, while crews tried to clean up the ruptured bags of rain-moistened litter.

Spring Township police Sgt. Bill P. Van Etten told the Reading Eagle that the driver of the rig suffered minor injuries in the crash, which happened about 2 a.m. The litter was on its way to a retail store.

A front-end loader was brought in to scoop up the litter and put it in large trash containers. The road reopened at 7 a.m.

Van Etten says the spill "was just really messy."

Man robs banks for bail money, given 6 years

CT MIDDLETOWN — A Connecticut man who authorities say robbed two banks to raise money to bail his girlfriend out of jail has been sentenced to almost six years in prison.

The Journal Inquirer reported that Martin Silvestro, 33, of South Windsor, also was sentenced to three years of probation after pleading guilty to one robbery.

Prosecutors said he got away

with \$32,000 when he robbed a Middletown bank in March 2015. The robbery occurred a day after he got away with much less during a robbery in East Hartford. Police say in both robberies he claimed to have a gun.

Police said Silvestro told an informant that he robbed the banks "to get my girl out because I have no one to watch the kids." The couple has elementary school-aged twin sons.

Teen charged with shooting woman in face

OH YOUNGSTOWN — A 14-year-old boy has been charged with attempted murder for allegedly shooting a northeast Ohio woman in the face on Feb. 6.

WKBN-TV reported that Youngstown police charged the youth Saturday, and he has been detained at the Mahoning County Juvenile Justice Center. He was taken to the police station by his mother.

The teen, whose name is being withheld, faces charges of attempted murder and attempted robbery in connection with the shooting of Ellen Zban, 57, of Youngstown, while she sat in her car in the driveway of her home. Zban was shot three times, once in the face and twice in the arm.

She survived and is recovering. She told the station she harbors no hatred for the boy.

Legislator wants to pack heat at Capitol

AR LITTLE ROCK — Despite metal detectors and armed guards at the Arkansas Capitol, a state lawmaker said he would feel safer if he was allowed to pack his own heat.

Republican Rep. Mickey

Gates is proposing that lawmakers licensed to carry a concealed handgun be allowed to bring their weapons into the Arkansas Capitol and other publicly owned facilities. Prisons would be excluded.

Arkansas lawmakers aren't subject to a search when they enter the capitol.

Security officials at the Oklahoma Capitol last year had grumbled about a growing trend among some lawmakers breezing through checkpoints and declining to submit to a required weapons screening.

In New Hampshire in January, a lawmaker dropped her loaded gun on the floor near some children. It didn't go off.

Zoo uses caps to save rowdy elephant's tusks

CA FRESNO — An elephant at the Fresno zoo with a bad habit of cracking his tusks has been stopped thanks to some added bling.

The Fresno Bee reported that Fresno Chaffee Zoo's male African elephant, Vus'Musi, hasn't cracked a tusk in more than six months thanks to a pair of special brass caps he wears.

Vus'Musi cracked or broke his tusks, leading zoo officials to look for a solution to keep the elephant from further damaging them.

Elephants use tusks to dig, lift and rub against trees, causing damage to what are essentially external teeth. Breaks and cracks in tusks can lead to infections.

The special brass caps Vus'Musi wears act like human crowns to help preserve the tusks.

From wire reports

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NFL players hit market as free agency begins

Los Angeles Times

INDIANAPOLIS Attention, NFL shoppers: The player store will be opening soon, with free agency starting this week.

The good news is teams have more money to spend. The salary cap has increased to \$167 million per team, a bump of more than \$12 million since last year.

The bad news is the shelves are pretty picked over, and some of the dazzling items that were previously advertised, well, they're not available anymore. Most notably, Pittsburgh used its exclusive franchise tag on running back Le'Veon Bell, essentially guaranteeing the star running back will play for the Steelers next season.

Free agency begins Thursday at 4 p.m., but interested teams can begin talking contract numbers Tuesday with the representatives of players due to become unrestricted free agents. For a lot of teams, the focus is on keeping the players they already have. That's the case, for instance, for the Miami Dolphins and receiver Kenny Stills, who is due to become a free agent.

"I hate free agency," Dolphins coach Adam Gase said. "You just want to get your guys back. Kenny and myself have a very close relationship. The worst thing about the NFL is sometimes that doesn't matter. Sometimes the money is what guys are looking for. Kenny, obviously, he'd love to stay here, but he's going to stay for the right price and what's comfortable for him, and I don't think anybody would blame him for that."

Some teams have plenty of money to spend. Cleveland (\$102 million of cap space), San Francisco (\$93 million) and Jacksonville (\$71 million) occupy the top three spots on that list, but those teams combined for six wins last season, so they have plenty of holes to fill. Meanwhile, the bargain hunters at the bottom of the list — the Los Angeles Chargers (\$5 million), Kansas City (\$4 million) and Dallas (\$3 million) — are going to have to rely more on filling needs through the draft.

It's common for teams to overpay for free agents, usually when there's a bidding war,

and the ripple effects of that can damage more than just the wallet.

"You pay a guy a lot of money and you plug him into the locker room, well, the locker room is watching," said Chris Ballard, the Indianapolis Colts' general manager. "So to me, that guy has to be a worker. He has to be a good teammate. He has to earn that money, and earn it right ... That's where my fear of free agency comes in."

There are some big-name players available. Minnesota declined to pick up the contract option on All-Pro running back Adrian Peterson, and Kansas City parted ways with Jamaal Charles, the club's all-time leading rusher. But both of those players are in their early 30s, old for the position, and are expected to be quite expensive.

The New York Jets are going through an extreme makeover, saying goodbye to cornerback Darrelle Revis, receiver Brandon Marshall, quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick and longtime center Nick Mangold, who was at Disney World with his family when he learned the team had cut him loose after 11 seasons.

"I was hoping there was going to be a negotiation of some sort to get something worked out," Mangold told the New York Post. "But when you're told, 'Hey, we're cutting you, and good luck,' that really caught me off guard."

Mangold, 33, is a victim of the 30-something purge, with teams opting for younger and cheaper talent. Among the aging stars available in this free-agent pool are defensive linemen Julius Peppers (37), Vince Wilfork (36), Trent Cole (34) and DeMarcus Ware (34), and offensive linemen Andrew Whitworth (35) and Jahri Evans (33).

Much of the off-season buzz has surrounded a few high-profile quarterbacks. Washington and Kirk Cousins have not come to an agreement on a long-term deal, although the team reportedly has offered \$20 million a season. Dallas is still trying to figure out what to do with Tony Romo, now that Dak Prescott has made him expendable. And New England will surely say goodbye to Jimmy Garoppolo, Tom Brady's backup, if the right offer comes along.

General managers have to find players that fit teams

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — NFL free agency isn't as simple as making a shopping list among available players and positions, then writing checks.

No matter how much a team needs a top cornerback to fix a porous secondary or a left tackle for a struggling offensive line, adding a veteran means finding someone who plugs as seamlessly into a locker room as into a coach's schemes on the field.

That requires as much homework and study as drafting a player out of college. Fitting a coach's strategies, displaying a strong work ethic and even the player's personality all are crucial pieces of the decision. Interviews at the NFL scouting

combine years before supply some answers. Game tape helps check production.

A wide receiver might've caught more passes if only his quarterback had more time to throw the ball, or that quarterback's line didn't protect well. Or that QB wasn't very good.

Before agreeing to a big deal, a chat with his own players is a must for a general manager, assuring himself that a free agent will meld with teammates.

"All these guys, it's a brotherhood," Titans GM Jon Robinson said. "NFL players talk, and they communicate with each other. We summon their opinions on the guys. You try to get the right chemistry and the right fit."

Free agency starts Thursday, and general managers always

believe they're filling needs while also signing players who slide perfectly onto the new rosters.

Strong impression: Robinson needed a center to fix the Titans' offensive line and help a young quarterback in Marcus Mariota. Knowing Houston center Ben Jones was about to hit free agency, Robinson thought back to when he interviewed Jones at the NFL Combine while working for the New England Patriots. Jones impressed Robinson by how he worked with his quarterback installing the game plan, and meeting with both his coordinator and coach Mark Richt.

"I'll never forget that conversation," Robinson said. "The way he presented himself. You could tell football was very important

to him, yet he had a personality that you knew everybody was going to try to jell and he was going to kind of help with that. Specifically to him, that combine experience with him certainly played a role."

Jones anchored the NFL's third-best rushing unit and a line that allowed 28 sacks a year after Tennessee gave up a league-worst 54 sacks.

All-pro find: Defensive tackle Damon "Snacks" Harrison played right under the noses of the New York Giants, spending his first four seasons in the same stadium playing for the Jets after going undrafted out of NAIA-level William Penn. Harrison proved worth every bit of his five-year deal with \$24 million guaranteed by becoming an All-Pro.

Gonzaga tops St. Mary's for WCC title

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Gonzaga coach Mark Few brought in veteran transfers and one of the best recruiting classes in school history this season, a group that's been called the best in his 18-year tenure as head coach.

The Zags have lived up to the hype so far, nearly pulling off an undefeated regular season and earning another West Coast Conference Tournament title. Next up could be another No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

Nigel Williams-Goss scored 22 points, Przemek Karnowski added 15 and No. 4 Gonzaga won its fifth straight WCC tournament title by beating No. 19 Saint Mary's 74-56 Tuesday night.

"It's no secret: If we play our best basketball, dial into the process the coaches give

us, play like we did in the first half at both ends of the floor, there's no doubt in our minds we can go win the whole entire tournament," said Williams-Goss, who also had six assists, six rebounds and six steals.

Gonzaga (32-1), the regular-season WCC champion, was not particularly sharp in the WCC semifinals, beating Santa Clara by nine to reach the title game for the 20th straight season.

The Zags got their mojo back in a dazzling first half against Saint Mary's, then had to hold on after a shaky start to the second.

Gonzaga shot 50 percent overall, scored 20 points off turnovers and had a 38-22 advantage inside, staking claim to a potential No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

"We're 32-1, this team has been exceptional all year," Few said. "They've stepped up and met every challenge. We've been

good from Nov. 10 to March 7 and haven't taken any nights off. Our results speak for themselves."

Saint Mary's (28-4) fought back after an ugly first half with a big charge in the second. The Gaels could not make it all the way back from a 21-point deficit, though, losing to the Zags for the third time this season.

Calvin Hermanson had 14 points and Jock Landale 10 for the Gaels, who must wait out selection Sunday for the second straight season.

"I felt good last year on this day and no question I felt we should have been in the tournament and I feel more confident this year," Saint Mary's coach Randy Bennett said. "Nothing is done until it's done, so the only chance to make sure was tonight. But there's not many teams that have done what we've done this season."

Mount wins Summit bid

Associated Press

EMMITSBURG, Md. — The freshly cut net draped around his neck like a well-fitted scarf, Mount St. Mary's coach Jamion Christian spoke excitedly about what just might have been the perfect night.

Playing for the Northeast Conference championship at home for the first time in school history, the Mountaineers thrilled a standing-room only crowd by rallying to beat Saint Francis University 71-61 Tuesday night to earn an automatic berth in the NCAA Tournament.

"It's just really special to be able to do it here in front of your fans with a great group of guys who you love," Christian said.

Christian never lost faith in that group of guys, even when they fell behind 31-23 at half-time after going 0-for-10 from beyond the arc and getting outscored 20-2 over a seven-minute stretch.

The top-seeded Mountaineers opened the second half with a 22-3 run that started with five straight points from Junior Robinson and a pair of three-pointers from Elijah Long.

Mount St. Mary's (19-15) coasted from there.

NKU earns first tourney berth

Associated Press

DETROIT — Lavone Holland's body was pressed against the court and he became the base of a celebratory pile of teammates.

Holland scored 20 points to help Northern Kentucky hold off Milwaukee for a 59-53 win Tuesday night in the Horizon League final, putting the school in the NCAA Tournament in its first season of eligibility.

"It has always been a dream of mine to be in one of those piles," Holland said after getting upright on the court, sporting a championship cap with a clipped piece of a basketball net tied into the back clasp. "And, it's a dream come true for that to happen after winning a game that puts us in the NCAA Tournament."

The fourth-seeded Norse (24-10) are in their fifth season of Division I basketball, but had to wait until this year to have a shot to earn a spot in college basketball's showcase.

"We got another game to play," Drew McDonald said after finishing with 14 points and 12 rebounds. "I got the chills just thinking about it."

Jim McMillan, the first recruit for the school's inaugural basketball team that debuted

during the 1971-72 season, waited in a long line to congratulate Northern Kentucky coach John Brannen on the court after the game below the banner-filled rafters at the home of the Detroit Red Wings.

"Thank you! Thank you!" McMillan told Brannen after giving him a hug. "I've been waiting 35 years for this."

Tenth-seeded Milwaukee (11-24) was a win away from having the most losses in NCAA Tournament history, which has had three 20-loss teams in its history: Cal Poly (2014), Liberty (2013) and Coppin State (2008).

"I think it was an inspiration," Panthers coach LaVall Jordan said. "I know for people in the Milwaukee community, our university and our city, it inspired a lot of belief when you are down and nobody thinks you can."

Brock Stull scored 19 points and Brett Pahl had 12 for the Panthers, who lost nine in a row coming into the tournament, then won three straight before their run ended on Tuesday.

The Norse were in control for much of the game, which had only one tie and one lead change, but they couldn't pull away from the pesky Panthers.

South Dakota State 79,

Omaha 77: After a sluggish start, South Dakota State dug in, took care of the ball, and hung on to defeat Omaha and win the Summit League championship for the fourth time.

Mike Daum scored 24 of his 37 points in the second half to help the Jackrabbits.

Omaha led with 4:43 left to play, but Daum, who was the league's player of the year and tournament MVP, took over. He scored seven straight to give South Dakota State a 73-72 lead with 3:30 left. The Jackrabbits wouldn't relinquish it. Omaha had a chance for the win at the buzzer, but Tra-Deon Hollins' three-pointer rimmed out.

Daum went 14-for-24 from the floor and continued his torrid scoring pace, averaging 29.3 points per game in SDSU's three conference tournament wins.

"He's just a heck of a player. He's just talented and the run a lot of sets for him. You have to be on your toes the entire game," Omaha's Tre'Sahwn Thurman said of Daum. "You have to be communicating and you have to know what's coming. He's able to create for other guys and able to create mismatches. He's just a tough guy to guard. I wish him well in the NCAA Tournament."

Mavs' Nowitzki reaches 30,000 points

Associated Press

DALLAS — Dirk Nowitzki scored the 20 points he needed for 30,000 in his career in barely more than a quarter, and the Dallas Mavericks celebrated with their second straight easy home win over the Los Angeles Lakers, a 122-111 victory Tuesday night.

The 7-foot German became the sixth NBA player and the first international one to reach the milestone, joining four Hall of Famers and a future one in Kobe Bryant. Nowitzki is one of three to score all 30,000-plus with one team. The others are Karl Malone (Utah) and Bryant (Lakers).

The 38-year-old Nowitzki matched the best first quarter in his 19 seasons by scoring 18

points, and reached the hallowed mark on a 15-foot fade-away jumper from the baseline over Larry Nance Jr. with 10:58 remaining in the second quarter.

Nowitzki scored all of his 25 points — one shy of his season high — in the first half to send the Mavericks to a 31-point lead in the third quarter. This was the Lakers' first visit to Dallas since setting a franchise record with a 49-point loss, a 122-73 blowout on Jan. 22.

Dallas extended a franchise record with its 14th straight win over the Lakers, who got a triple-double from Julius Randle with 13 points, 18 rebounds and 10 assists in their eighth straight loss.

Trail Blazers 126, Thunder 121: Portland overcame Rus-

sell Westbrook's career-high 58 points to beat host Oklahoma City.

Allen Crabbe scored 23 points, Damian Lillard had 22 and C.J. McCollum 21 for the Trail Blazers, who won their third straight. Portland shot 55 percent from the field.

Westbrook shot 21-for-39, but just 6-for-15 in the fourth quarter. Westbrook entered the game as the league leader in points and plus/minus score in the last five minutes of regulation and overtime.

Westbrook also finished the game with nine assists and made 13 of 16 free throws.

Victor Oladipo scored 16 points and Enes Kanter added 11 for Oklahoma City, which dropped its fourth straight. Oklahoma City lost despite

shooting 52 percent.

Wizards 131, Suns 127: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 29 points, setting a franchise record for free throws made by going 16-for-16, and Washington opened a five-game western trip with a victory over pesky Phoenix.

Bradley Beal had 27 points and John Wall added 25 points and 14 assists in a victory that ended the Suns' three-game winning streak, their longest since November 2015.

Eric Bledsoe scored 30 points for the Suns, who erased a 22-point, first-half deficit, were tied at 110 with 5:16 to play and challenged the Wizards in the final two minutes before Wall finally clinched it with two free throws with 6.5 seconds to play.

Red-hot Canadiens cool off Canucks, win sixth straight

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Carey Price and the Canadiens cooled down what little momentum Vancouver built up recently with back-to-back wins.

Price made 27 saves and Paul Byron scored in overtime as Montreal defeated the Canucks 2-1 on Tuesday night.

The loss snapped a modest two-game win streak for the Canucks after picking up road victories in southern California. Vancouver (28-31-7) desperately needed the points to keep its fading playoff hopes alive. The Canucks are now seven points back of St. Louis for the second wild card spot after the Blues beat the Wild 2-1 on Tuesday.

"It's disappointing and frustrating. It would have been huge for us in the standings," said Michael Chaput, who scored Vancouver's lone goal in the game. "Now we have to think about Thursday's game and get back to it."

For Price and the red-hot Canadiens it's a polar opposite scenario. The Atlantic Division-leading Habs (38-21-8)

have won six straight and are thriving under new head coach Claude Julien with a 7-2 record.

As for Price, he's been stellar recently, with a shutout and only five goals allowed in his last five games — all wins.

"It's not just me, it's our defensive play in general," said Price, deflecting the credit. "Ever since the bye we have been playing very well."

Torrey Mitchell scored his first goal for the Canadiens in 39 games. It came in the first period on a redirect off Andrei Markov's wrist shot from the blue-line. The noticeably vocal contingent of Habs fans present roared in approval.

"Mitchy is a character guy," said Price. "He brings speed and tenacity to our game. He's a good presence in our locker-room, and he's a great teammate. I'm happy for him."

Vancouver goalie Ryan Miller had a busy night with 36 saves and couldn't do much against Byron's OT winner.

Blue Jackets 2, Devils 0: Sergei Bobrovsky made 33 saves for his third consecutive shutout and host Columbus

handed New Jersey its eighth straight loss.

Bobrovsky shut out the Devils for the second time in three days as he made 20 saves in a 3-0 win on Sunday.

Flyers 6, Sabres 3: Radko Gudas had a goal and two assists, and Philadelphia continued its late-season playoff push with a win over host Buffalo.

Rangers 5, Panthers 2: Henrik Lundqvist made 43 saves to earn his 30th win of the season and lead New York over host Florida.

Maple Leafs 3, Red Wings 2: James van Riemsdyk broke out of a scoring slump, and host Toronto snapped a five-game losing streak.

Alexey Marchenko and Nazem Kadri also scored for the Maple Leafs, who were 0-2-3 in their previous five games. Rookie Mitch Marner and Tyler Bozak each had two assists.

Blues 2, Wild 1: Vladimir Tarasenko and David Perron scored and Jake Allen made 32 saves and host St. Louis edged Minnesota.

Allen was 10.5 seconds away from a second straight shutout before Wild center Mikko

Koivu threw a puck on net from near the blue line which bounced past Allen.

Avalanche 3, Hurricanes 1: Gabriel Landeskog and Tyson Barrie scored goals 46 seconds apart in the second period and host Colorado beat Carolina.

Islanders 4, Oilers 1: Anders Lee scored a pair of goals and New York earned a victory over host Edmonton.

Joshua Ho-Sang, with his first career NHL goal, and Andrew Ladd also scored for the Islanders, who snapped a two-game losing skid.

Ducks 4, Predators 3 (SO): Patrick Eaves scored the only goal of the shootout in the fifth round, and Jonathan Bernier capped a 24-save performance with a perfect shootout in host Anaheim's victory over Nashville.

Rickard Rakell scored the tying goal late in the second period for the Ducks, who rallied from a pair of two-goal deficits for a key victory in their playoff surge. Ryan Getzlaf had a goal and two assists, and Nick Ritchie also scored for Anaheim.