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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Militants rely on stealth tactics in Mosul

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

MOSUL, Iraq — The houses here are marked with sinister intent.

Throughout northern Iraq, in areas the Islamic State group seized more than two years ago, houses have been tagged with graffiti symbols to indicate if the owner was Christian or Shiite, or to claim the property for the Sunni extremist group.

But in the al-Dandan neighborhood of Mosul, near the city's southernmost bridge, a red circle spray-painted near the front gate means the covered driveway could be used to hide a car bomb from overhead observation.

It's one of many ways Islamic State militants have sought to use stealth to counter the sophisticated surveillance and strike capabilities the U.S.-led coalition is providing to aid the Iraqis.

As fighting began to the city's east and south in October, the jihadis burned oil and tires to cre-

ate smoke screens. Iraqi forces uncovered underground tunnels and found rows of adjacent homes with the walls broken down to allow fighters to slip unseen from house to house.

During the latest push north on Mosul's west side, which began in February, Iraqi forces south of the city discovered an entire extremist training camp built inside a milelong railroad tunnel, with an obstacle course, a firing range, a mosque and a clinic inside.

Now, as the battle continues into the city's center, the militants may be using tarps stretched across the narrow streets of Old Town to conceal mortar positions from aerial surveillance.

"They pull the tarp away to fire a mortar, then pull it closed," said Sgt. Alaa Hassan, a soldier with Iraq's emergency response division, who accompanied reporters this week.

Some higher-ranking officers in the elite unit disputed that claim.

"They burn a lot of tires and black oil," said Brig. Gen. Abbas al-Jabouri, but they're not hiding under tarps.

In al-Dandan, Islamic State militants forced residents to pull their cars out of their driveways and into the streets to block the road, said a man who gave his name as Abu Akhmed, an alias, because he feared reprisal. In some cases, those vehicles have reportedly been packed with explosives or set on fire to slow the Iraqi advance.

Akhmed's Toyota is now one of several husks of rusting metal cluttering a crater from a coalition airstrike to destroy the roadblock just outside the gate of his home, where he lives with his wife, two sons and their wives.

"I saw hell," he said of the airstrike, saying he hopes the Americans won't hit near his home again. "Please, Trump — please, no."

He hasn't fled, unlike tens of thousands of other Mosul residents. That's because he thinks

they're safer in their home than in a camp for displaced people, though bombs continued to explode nearby Wednesday, many of them apparently hidden in homes and cars.

Standing outside his front gate, Akhmed flinched with each blast. He looked around for his sons, tensing in preparation to sprint to them or back into their home.

At one point, a blast went off so close that fragments rained into the street. It was a house bomb, Hassan said, judging by the greenish smoke.

As they move further into the city, Iraqi forces have switched their tactics, operating at night to cover their movements and to surprise their enemy.

But one such raid on Tuesday, to retake a government complex, turned into a deadly trap as Islamic State militants from hidden sniper positions fired on Iraqi forces, and previously concealed car bombs rammed their convoys, The Associated Press reported.

Hundreds of new Afghan army officers vow to fight

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

CAMP QARGAH, Afghanistan — Newly minted Afghan army officers vowed on Thursday to fight and defeat the militants launching terrorist attacks across the country.

The Afghan National Army Officer Academy graduation came one day after suspected Islamic State fighters stormed Afghanistan's largest military hospital, killing dozens and injuring dozens more.

"It has not affected our morale," said Brig. Gen. Muhammad Sharif Sharifi, the

academy's commandant. "Our graduation is our response to the enemy."

During Thursday's ceremony, 318 male and 22 female cadets marched in formation in front of attendees, who included Defense Minister Abdullah Habibi and Britain's Vice Chief of the Defense Staff Gen. Sir Gordon Kenneth Messenger.

Attacks on Afghan security forces have escalated in recent months, and casualties have mounted.

Nearly 6,800 servicemembers and police were killed last year and about 11,800 others were injured. In the meantime,

the amount of government-controlled territory has decreased, with Taliban insurgents now controlling more land than at any time since 2001, when a U.S.-led invasion ousted them from power.

"We want to defend our country, and we will be daring," said 2nd Lt. Toofan Zahir, 23, who was named the top graduating cadet. "We are not afraid of terrorists or anyone else who wants to occupy our country, who wants to attack our people."

Second Lt. Hamida Haidery expressed concern about recent attacks targeting Afghan security forces, "but that can't

stop us," she said. "We will keep working in the army to stop those type of people."

The ANAOA is modeled on the British military academy of Sandhurst, which helped establish the school on the western outskirts of Kabul in 2013. While it is Afghan-run, instructors from Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark serve as mentors.

The officer course runs for a full year, with new courses starting about every four months.

Officials hope initiatives like the officers' academy will help younger leaders foster a more professional Afghan army with meritocracy at its core.

US troop increase risks Syria entanglement

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Rolling around 200 Marines backed with howitzers into northern Syria, the United States is shifting from working quietly behind the scenes in Syria's conflict, turning instead toward overt displays of U.S. force in an attempt to shape the fight.

The latest deployment widens America's footprint in a highly toxic battlefield, with U.S. credibility and prestige on the line. It also risks drawing troops into a long and costly war with unpredictable outcomes.

The Marines' deployment, intended to back local forces in the campaign against the Islamic State group, came just days after another intervention. Dozens of Army troops, riding Stryker armored vehicles waving American flags, drove outside the Syrian town of Manbij in a mission aimed at keeping U.S. allies Turkey and Syrian Kurds from fighting each other and focused instead on the fight against the Islamic State group.

The latest dispatch brings the number of U.S. boots on the ground in Syria close to more than 700.

The previous troops were sent quietly by the Obama administration to work with local allies against the Islamic State group; most of them were special operations forces and advisers, and none brought with them heavy weapons, such as artillery.

But as the fight against the Islamic State group gears up, so does the U.S. profile.

After months of preparations, U.S.-backed Syrian forces are getting closer to launching an all-out assault on the Islamic State group's de facto capital, Raqqa, in northern Syria. The more robust presence also could reflect a freer hand given to the military by President Donald Trump,

whose administration is drawing up plans for a Syria policy that he has vowed will "obliterate" the Islamic State group.

But the Americans are stepping into a crowded space in northern Syria, where U.S.-backed Kurdish groups, Turkish and Russian troops, Syrian government forces and Islamic State militants are all within firing range of one another.

That raises concerns:

■ **Mission creep:** U.S. officials say the battle for Raqqa will look much like the fight in neighboring Iraq, where the U.S. has waged a heavy air campaign and has deployed special operations forces at the front lines to back the Iraqi military, now in a fierce battle to retake the northern city of Mosul from the Islamic State group. During the past two years, the U.S.-backed international coalition has spent billions of dollars training and arming the Iraqi military

But Syria is not Iraq.

In Syria, U.S. forces do not have a national military to partner with — unless Washington makes a dramatic reversal and overtly partners with Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Though no formal decision has been announced, the U.S. is likely to partner with the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is dominated by Kurds, though it includes some Arab fighters and other ethnicities. The U.S.-backed group has proved to be the most effective fighting force against the Islamic State group in Syria, moving in past months to isolate Raqqa and to cut off supply lines.

But it is still seen as ill-equipped for the difficult assault on militants entrenched in the city. That could bring pressure for a greater U.S. role — and a greater risk of confrontations with other players on the

ground.

■ **Antagonizing Turkey:** Partnering with the Kurds to take Raqqa also could cause major damage to the U.S. relationship with NATO ally Turkey. Turkey has suggested its own military and its allied Syria forces should mount the fight, and that U.S.-backed Syrian Kurds should be excluded.

"If the U.S. were to prefer terrorist organizations over Turkey in the fight against IS, that would be their own decision, but that wouldn't be something we would consent" to, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told The Associated Press on Thursday.

Yildirim said in an earlier exchange with visiting foreign journalists that ties between the two countries would be significantly undermined, though he wouldn't specify any steps Turkey — a member of the U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group — might take. In the past, Turkey has hinted it could cut off access to Incirlik air base, home to coalition warplanes.

■ **Indirect alliance:** By partnering with the Kurds in the Raqqa assault, the U.S. also risks being seen as entering into an indirect alliance with Russia and Assad's government, which Moscow backs.

With Russian air support, Assad's troops and allied forces like Lebanon's Hezbollah have advanced against Islamic State in northern and central Syria. In the Syrian army's advance against Islamic State troops in Palmyra, the troops were indirectly aided by U.S. airstrikes against the group.

Promising to scale up the war on the Islamic State group, Trump has hinted he would be less averse to an implied alliance with the Russians and perhaps even Assad, which he has described as a better option than the rebels.

US-backed forces confident of taking militant 'capital'

Associated Press

BEIRUT — The main Syrian Kurdish force fighting Islamic State militants in northern Syria said Friday that it has enough fighters to take the extremists' de facto capital of Raqqa with the help of the U.S.-led coalition — remarks that reflect a veiled warning to Ankara and also to rival, Turkey-backed opposition forces making headway toward the city.

The comments by Cihan Sheikh Ehmed, the spokeswoman of the Syrian Democratic Forces, came as U.S. troops are playing a bigger role on the ground in the battle to capture Raqqa in northern Syria.

Gen. Joseph Votel, the top U.S. commander in the Middle East, signaled Thurs-

day that there will be a larger and longer American military presence in Syria to accelerate the fight against the Islamic State group and to quell friction within the complicated mix of warring factions there.

The SDF spokeswoman said their numbers are increasing with more residents of newly liberated areas from the Islamic State group joining the ethnically mixed force, which has been the most effective group on the ground in Syria in the battle against the terrorist organization.

"We have enough forces to liberate Raqqa with the help of the coalition," Sheikh Ehmed said, adding that their troops received intelligence that the Islamic State group is moving some of its leaders outside the city and are digging tunnels in prepa-

ration for intense street battles — much like those underway in neighboring Iraq, where the Iraqi forces, backed by the U.S.-led coalition, are fighting to rout the Islamic State group from the western part of the city of Mosul, the extremists' last remaining urban stronghold in Iraq.

But the spokeswoman's remarks are likely to anger Turkey, which has insisted that Syrian opposition fighters backed by Ankara should lead the offensive on Raqqa rather than the SDF, which is dominated by the Syrian Kurdish militia known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG. Turkey has declared the YPG a terrorist organization and considers it to be linked to its own home-grown Kurdish insurgency.

GOP pushes its health bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Determined House Republicans pushed ahead Thursday with divisive legislation to undo former President Barack Obama's health care law, holding all-night voting sessions in key committees despite Democratic protest and opposition from doctors and consumer groups.

The GOP scored a pre-dawn triumph in the Ways and Means Committee after nearly 18 hours of debate, as the panel approved legislation to reshape the way millions of Americans pay for medical care, including abolishing the tax penalty Obama's statute imposes on people who don't purchase insurance.

Lawmakers on the Energy and Commerce Committee struggled past the 24-hour mark. The lawmakers guzzled coffee and took breaks in their private cloakrooms but couldn't stray far out of fear they could miss a vote.

Earlier, Republicans claimed progress, as the Ways and Means Committee voted its approval. Panel chairman Kevin Brady, of Texas, said, "We voted repeatedly to end Obamacare's crushing taxes and mandates and ensure patients have more power over their own health care."

But the panel's top Democrat, Richard Neal, of Massachusetts, protested that the GOP bill "would drastically increase costs and lower coverage and quality care."

The intense effort underscored GOP leaders' desire to keep the momentum on their drive to undo Obama's health law. President Donald Trump is telling lawmakers he's all-in, and he assigned Vice President Mike Pence to travel to Louisville, Ky., on Saturday, home state of one of the most prominent GOP critics, Sen. Rand Paul.

The White House and GOP leaders confront a party and outside groups divided over the party's overhaul campaign, including conservatives like Paul who say the party should simply pursue a straight-forward repeal bill.

Report offers details about SEAL unit flying Trump's flag

Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader

New details have emerged about why a Navy SEALs convoy flew a campaign flag for President Donald Trump on a Kentucky highway in late January, according to documents obtained by the Herald-Leader.

The blue Trump flag, affixed "to a rear [Humvee] antenna with zip ties," was flown on a convoy of 11 vehicles containing 12 Navy personnel, said the Department of the Navy inquiry obtained using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The names of the sailors were redacted in the report because disclosure would endanger the lives or safety of personnel, the Navy said.

The flag was attached by a Navy SEAL who, according to an interview the Department of the Navy conducted with him on Feb. 3, "made the decision to place the flag on the Humvee without discussing it with anyone in the convoy."

"He placed it on the Humvee on Friday before departing," the documents stated. "He did not know who owned the flag because he has bought many campaign flags for the members of his Troop. He was unaware of any regulations that flying the campaign flag would have violated. [The man who attached the flag] drove home for the weekend and was not with the convoy while it transited."

The Navy SEALs group was traveling from Fort Knox, Ky., to Muscatatuck Urban Training Center in Butlerville, Ind., roughly 110 miles away, the documents stated. The convoy commander, unnamed in the report, traveled with the convoy on Jan. 29 at 11 a.m. This commander was responsible for inspecting all the vehicles prior to departure and was aware the flag was on the vehicle.

"[The convoy commander] was also aware of the rules precluding Department of Defense endorsement of political candi-

dates during an election," the documents stated. "However, he believed that flying the flag was not inappropriate since the election was over and since the candidate was now the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces."

This thinking violated a long-standing policy to avoid any activity that might imply DOD endorsement of a political campaign, the documents stated.

About 30 minutes into the drive on I-65, the convoy commander noticed that the flag was getting attention from civilian drivers, "some of which was negative attention."

"At this point, he felt like the correct course of action would have been to take the flag down," the documents stated. "However, he was concerned that it would be unsafe for the convoy and its members to pull over while on the highway."

Bill would curb VA workers' union activity

By NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — There's a new effort in Congress to place restrictions on union activities for employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs following scrutiny over the amount of time workers at the agency spend on union affairs.

Rep. Jodey Arrington, R-Texas, introduced legislation Thursday that would prohibit employees from spending more than 50 percent of their work time on union activities. Employees who work directly with patients would be limited to 25 percent.

The Government Accountability Office released findings last month that the VA doesn't accurately record the amount of time employees spend on union business. Arrington es-

pecially took issue with a finding that 346 employees spent 100 percent of their work time as union representatives in fiscal 2015.

"It is outrageous and unconscionable that VA employees, especially employees who provide much needed health care services, are spending the majority of their time conducting union business instead of fulfilling the duties they were hired to do," Arrington said Thursday in a written statement.

Arrington is a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. The legislation gained the support of Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., who is the committee chairman.

A release about the legislation states it also would "put an end to forcing VA employees to pay union dues" and would give them the option to opt out

of their unions at any time.

Tim Kauffman, a communications specialist with the largest VA union — the American Federation of Government Employees — said federal employees are not required to join. Members now are allowed to opt out only during their renewal periods.

The legislation comes at a time when the union is fighting another bill that it sees as an attack on the due process rights of VA employees. A bill passed by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on Wednesday aims to make it easier to fire poorly performing VA employees, and it does away with employees' option for a grievance process. Roe, who pushed to do away with the grievance process, said it delays action against employees and can take nearly a year to complete.

Court ousts S. Korea's leader

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's Constitutional Court removed impeached President Park Geun-hye from office in a unanimous ruling Friday over a corruption scandal that has plunged the country into political turmoil and worsened an already serious national divide.

The decision capped a stunning fall for the country's first female leader, who rode a wave of lingering conservative nostalgia for her late dictator father to victory in 2012.

Two people died during protests that followed the ruling. Police and hospital officials said about 30 protesters and police officers were injured in the violent clashes near the court, which prompted Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, the country's acting head of state, to plead for peace and urge Park's angry supporters to move on.

The ruling allows criminal proceedings against Park, 65, and makes her South Korea's first democratically elected leader to be removed from office since democracy replaced dictatorship in the late 1980s.

It also deepens South Korea's political and security uncertainty as the country faces exist-

tential threats from North Korea; reported economic retaliation from China, which is furious about Seoul's cooperation with the U.S. on an anti-missile system; and questions in Seoul about the new Trump administration's commitment to the countries' security alliance.

Acting Chief Justice Lee Jung-mi accused Park of colluding with longtime confidante Choi Soon-sil to extort tens of millions of dollars from businesses and letting Choi meddle in state affairs and receive and look at documents with state secrets.

Park's lawyer, Seo Seok-gu, who had previously compared Park's impeachment to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, called the verdict a "tragic decision" made under pressure, and he questioned the fairness of what he called a "kangaroo court."

South Korea must now hold an election within two months to choose Park's successor. Liberal Moon Jae-in, who lost to Park in the 2012 election, currently enjoys a comfortable lead in opinion surveys.

Pre-verdict surveys showed 70 percent to 80 percent of South Koreans wanted the court to approve Park's impeachment. But there have been worries Park's

ouster would further polarize the country and cause violence.

Sensing history, thousands of people — both pro-Park supporters, many of them dressed in army-style fatigues and wearing red berets, and those who wanted Park gone — gathered around the Constitutional Court building and a huge public square in downtown Seoul.

A big TV screen was set up near the court so people could watch the verdict live. Hundreds of police were on hand. The streets near the court were lined with police buses and barricades.

Some of Park's supporters reacted to the ruling with anger, shouting and hitting police officers and reporters with plastic flag poles and steel ladders, and climbing on police buses. Anti-Park protesters celebrated by marching in the streets near the presidential Blue House, carrying an effigy of Park in prison clothes and tied up with rope.

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency said two people died while protesting Park's removal. An official from the Seoul National University Hospital said a man in his 70s, believed to be a Park supporter, died from head wounds after falling from the top of a police bus.

7 injured in ax attack at German train station

Associated Press

BERLIN — A man was arrested after injuring seven people with an ax at the main train station in Duesseldorf, Germany, on Thursday in what appeared to be a random attack, police said.

Officers were alerted about an attack shortly before 9 p.m., prompting a large-scale police response.

"A person, probably armed with an ax, attacked people at random," police said in a statement. Seven people were injured, three of them seriously. The statement said police are investigating whether the suspect attacked passengers on a commuter train as well.

The suspected attacker was arrested after jumping off an overpass near the train station, the statement said. The 36-year-old man, described as being from "the former Yugoslavia" and living in the nearby city of Wuppertal, suffered serious injuries and was being treated in a hospital.

"The suspect appears to have had psychological problems," police said.

An ax was recovered and officers were searching the area in and around the station, which was closed for the investigation. Police withdrew an earlier report that a second person had been arrested, saying later that they were working on the assumption the man had acted alone.

German authorities have heightened security measures following a series of attacks in public places over the past year.

In one attack last July, a 17-year-old Afghan asylum-seeker traveling on a train near Wuerzburg injured five people with an ax and a knife before being shot dead by police. The attack was later claimed by the Islamic State group.

EU leaders mull bloc's future

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — European Union leaders are debating the future of their bloc as Britain eyes the exit door and far-right parties look to get strong results in upcoming elections, and will be hoping Friday to quickly heal a new rift with Poland.

The 27 leaders, minus British Prime Minister Theresa May, gathered at EU headquarters a day after Donald Tusk was re-elected to a second term in one of the bloc's most prestigious jobs over the objections of Poland, his homeland.

Discussions Friday were to focus on the 27 leaders' summit in Rome later this month to mark the 60th anniversary of the EU's founding treaty, and how to maintain unity amid severe political and migration pressure.

The leaders are weighing how a future EU should operate — whether it should limit itself to being a trade bloc, steam toward a federal superstate or allow some members to advance at different speeds when practical.

An immediate concern, though, was moving

past Thursday's spat with the nationalist government in Warsaw, which was alone in trying to block Tusk — a former Polish prime minister and bitter political rival — as president of the EU Council. Poland then refused to approve some summit texts.

"I am convinced that this will be an episode," Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern said. "I see no sense, either for the Poles or the rest, in going to sulk in a corner."

Europe must concentrate on matters of substance — jobs, economic growth, migration and security — "and there are good approaches from which I think we have a good chance of finding a consensus among the 27," he said.

Luxembourg's prime minister made clear that frustration with Poland lingered, saying that "behavior like yesterday's is not acceptable."

"I don't think yesterday will be the long-term state of the EU," Xavier Bettel said. "I am convinced that Poland will become sensible again in the coming days and weeks."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Judge rules against man mistakenly jailed

MI PORT HURON — A judge has dismissed a lawsuit by a Michigan man who was arrested for driving with his ex-wife in a records screw-up that put him in jail for three days.

Federal Judge Laurie Michelson said Monday the arrest was “unfortunate,” but police acted reasonably.

Joseph Scott was stopped in 2013 for not wearing a seat belt. The officer found Scott was violating a personal protection order by traveling with his ex-wife.

Coralee Scott insisted the order had expired. But Joseph Scott was kept in jail for three days after first being treated for a panic attack.

Authorities discovered the Scotts were right: The expiration date on the protection order was wrongly entered into a database.

Gelato leads police to burglary suspect

SC CHARLESTON — Charleston Police were able to nab a burglary suspect when they linked gelato in his possession to the same Italian-style ice cream that had been stolen from a store.

The Post and Courier of Charleston reported that police responded to a report of a string of vandalisms at 12:30 a.m. Wednesday on Broad Street. Officers found shattered glass at eight buildings on the street and four more on a street nearby.

Around 1 a.m., police found Robert Corbit Hodges, 20, nearby. He was drunk, bleeding and carrying a container of gelato.

Investigators determined the gelato had been taken from Burbages Grocery, one of the

targeted businesses.

Hodges was arrested on charges of second-degree burglary and public intoxication.

Drunken driver crash damages historic bar

PA YARDLEY — Police said a man was driving carelessly, too fast and too drunk when he crashed his pickup into a landmark Pennsylvania tavern.

Yardley police charged Joey Buchter, 22, in Tuesday night's crash at the Continental Tavern.

The tavern building dates to 1860. It once served as a stop on the Underground Railroad used to lead slaves to freedom and likely operated as a speakeasy during Prohibition.

The crash damaged the porch. The owners hope to have it repaired in time for St. Patrick's Day.

7 face trial for taking artifacts from mounds

MS OXFORD — A federal judge has set a trial date for seven people accused of taking artifacts from Indian burial mounds.

WTVA-TV reported that Matthew Glen Arnold, Melinda Jean Chaffin, Chris Holley, Samuel Lee Howell, Tyler Wilemon, Sandra Arnold and Jackie Dale Arnold are named in the federal indictment and are scheduled to go to trial on May 1.

According to the indictment, the defendants removed artifacts from the Doskie Indian Mound on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers property.

The charges include conspiracy to defraud the government, violation of the archaeological resource protection act and damage to government property greater than \$1,000.

Suspect robs 3 places in less than an hour

PA PHILADELPHIA — Authorities in Philadelphia are searching for a man who they say went on a robbery spree.

Police told WPVI-TV that the suspect robbed a Family Dollar around 3 p.m. Wednesday. Investigators said he then robbed a Beneficial Bank and a Metro PCS in the next 45 minutes.

According to police, the suspect may have grabbed a dye pack from the bank, so he might have red dye on his hands.

Police are still searching for the suspect.

Dead shark found in cart in parking lot

FL ST. AUGUSTINE — Authorities are mystified as to why a 5-foot-long dead shark was left in the parking lot of a Florida Wal-Mart days before another dead shark was found nearby.

The St. Augustine Record reported St. Johns County Sheriff's deputies were called to the store parking lot last week after the shark was found in a shopping cart. Deputies talked to the owner of an RV parked nearby and learned that the RV owner had woken to find the shark on his vehicle's hood. The owner said he then put it in the cart.

The sheriff's office said days later, they were called to a driveway in Vilano Beach and found another dead shark.

The deputies called in the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission to dispose of the sharks.

Lawyer's pants catch fire in closing remarks

FL MIAMI — A Miami defense attorney is feeling the heat after his pants caught

fire as he delivered closing arguments in an arson case.

Witnesses told the Miami Herald that Stephen Gutierrez, 28, was fiddling in his pocket while addressing jurors when smoke started billowing from his pants. At the time, he was arguing his client's car spontaneously combusted and wasn't intentionally set on fire.

Gutierrez was unharmed and insisted it wasn't a staged defense gone wrong. The Herald reports he blamed a faulty e-cigarette battery.

Miami-Dade police and prosecutors are investigating the incident. Investigators seized frayed e-cigarette batteries as evidence.

Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Michael Hanzman could hold Gutierrez in contempt of court.

Gutierrez represented Claudy Charles, 48, who was eventually convicted of second-degree arson.

Inmates' Socials released to ID thief

OH MANSFIELD — The Ohio prisons system said it's looking into identity theft monitoring services for inmates after the agency accidentally released about 2,000 prisoners' Social Security numbers.

The information was mistakenly included on a list of inmates at Chillicothe Correctional Institution provided in a records request to an ex-offender who regularly requests such rosters.

The Mansfield News Journal reported Lonny Bristow, 43, turned the information over to the newspaper Tuesday, a day after receiving the records.

Bristow's past convictions include credit card scams committed while serving previous sentences. Bristow said he didn't plan to use the information because his criminal life is over.

From wire reports

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Texans send Brock Osweiler to Browns

Associated Press

Everyone expected a free agency flurry when the NFL's year began on Thursday. Predicting what happened with Brock Osweiler was beyond anyone's projections.

One year after signing a four-year deal with Houston, then losing the starting job to Tom Savage late in the season before returning and winning a playoff game, Osweiler is headed to Cleveland. The Texans basically took whatever deal they could get to rid themselves of a \$16 million payout to the quarterback in 2017. The Browns and Texans are also swapping fourth- and sixth-round picks in 2017, and Cleveland gets a 2018 second-rounder.

Far more predictable was Chicago releasing Jay Cutler, who had no guaranteed money left on his contract. Cutler led the Bears to the 2010 NFC championship game, but otherwise struggled in Chicago.

"His ability, toughness, and intelligence were on daily display (...) He had an extraordinary impact off the field, doing things for people, especially kids, without expecting or wanting any recognition," Chairman George McCaskey said. "I was and am a big fan of his."

Yet another QB soon to be on the move, the Cowboys' Tony Romo teasingly told fans in a tweeted video: "Hey everyone. I just wanted to come to tell you it's been a crazy 48 hours here. Me and my family felt the outpouring of support and love from all of you. It's been overwhelming and it doesn't go unnoticed. I want to say thank you and we have a lot of think about going forward but we'll see what happens. Until then I'm just going to keep listening to Bob Dylan."

Romo could be headed to Houston to replace Osweiler now that the Texans have room to pay him. Whether Dallas releases its longtime quarterback or works out a trade will soon be known.

As for the Texans-Browns stunner, it's possible Cleveland, which owns the top

pick in April's draft, will be moving Osweiler, too. But the Browns had plenty of cap room to absorb the financial hit and load up with more draft picks.

"We're really excited to acquire a second-round draft choice in this trade," said Sashi Brown, Cleveland's executive vice president of football operations. "Draft picks are extremely important to our approach in building a championship caliber football team. We are intent on adding competition to every position on our roster and look forward to having Brock come in and compete."

Cleveland added to the offensive line guard Kevin Zeitler, late of division rival Cincinnati, and center J.C. Tretter from Green Bay. Joel Bitonio got a five-year extension — so much for the Browns' needs at guard.

Among the busiest teams were the Buccaneers and Eagles, each getting a dangerous receiver for its young passer.

Tampa Bay brought in DeSean Jackson to team with Mike Evans as targets for Jameis Winston.

Jackson is one of five players since the 1970 merger with 26 or more career touchdowns of 50-plus yards. Only Hall of Famer Jerry Rice (23) has more than Jackson's 22 touchdowns of 60-plus yards.

"DeSean is exactly the type of dynamic playmaker we have been targeting for our offense," said Buccaneers coach Dirk Koetter. "DeSean brings a veteran presence and a big-play mentality that fits in perfectly with our offensive philosophy."

The Buccaneers also added defensive tackle Chris Baker, late of Washington.

Philadelphia got perhaps the most coveted wideout available in Alshon Jeffery, who left Chicago, and also agreed to terms with Torrey Smith, who was cut by San Francisco.

Baltimore agreed to terms with perhaps the best defensive tackle available, Brandon Williams, who returns after four seasons with the Ravens. A third-rounder

in 2013, he has 158 tackles (97 solo), 4½ sacks, three passes defended, three forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries.

■ Miami finalized a trade of guard Branden Albert to Jacksonville for tight end Julius Thomas, then added TE Anthony Fasano. The Dolphins kept safety Reshad Jones, who got a \$60 million, five-year contract extension.

■ Jacksonville bolstered its defense when it agreed to terms with Houston cornerback A.J. Bouye, Arizona defensive end Calais Campbell and Dallas safety Barry Church on deals totaling more than \$150 million.

The 25-year-old Bouye agreed to a five-year deal worth \$67.5 million, with \$26 million guaranteed. Bouye was considered the top cornerback on the market and will start opposite budding star Jalen Ramsey.

The 30-year-old Campbell had 501 tackles, eight forced fumbles and three interceptions in nine seasons with the Cardinals. He also missed just six games.

■ Buffalo released veteran safety Aaron Williams, who's plagued by neck problems, and agreed to terms with fullback Patrick DiMarco, kicker Stephen Hauschka, safeties Micah Hyde and Jordan Poyer, and guard Vladimir Ducasse.

■ San Francisco was as busy as anyone, agreeing to deals with receivers Pierre Garçon and Marquise Goodwin, QB Brian Hoyer, TE Logan Paulsen, kicker Robbie Gould, linebacker Malcolm Smith — the MVP of the 2014 Super Bowl — and FB Kyle Juszczyk.

■ The Panthers broke from their traditionally conservative free agency spending and gave left tackle Matt Kalil a five-year deal worth \$55.5 million, the largest free agent contract ever given out by the Panthers. He joins his older brother Ryan Kalil, Carolina's two-time All-Pro center.

Redskins fire GM on first day of free agency

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — On the opening day of NFL free agency, the Washington Redskins made a franchise-altering move that didn't involve a player.

They fired general manager Scot McCloughan on Thursday, ending speculation about his future that had clouded the organization in recent weeks. Team president Bruce Allen

announced the firing, which is effective immediately.

McCloughan, 46, served as GM for the past two years and had a four-year contract.

The day McCloughan was hired, Allen said the new GM would have full control over personnel decisions, but there were splits in the front office on a number of issues.

"The organization remains

confident in our personnel department as we execute our free agency plans as well as prepare for the upcoming NFL Draft," Allen said in the statement, adding that the team will have no further comment on McCloughan's departure.

In a curious turn of events, McCloughan did not attend the scouting combine in Indianapolis earlier this month, with a

spokesman saying he was "taking care of family matters."

The combine is a key evaluating opportunity ahead of the April draft where many decision-makers and agents are present, and the Redskins were represented by Allen, coach Jay Gruden and other officials.

The Redskins did not give an official reason for McCloughan's firing.

Dominican Republic hammers Canada

Associated Press

MIAMI — Jose Bautista homered and drove in four runs Thursday, and the Dominican Republic opened its bid for a second consecutive World Baseball Classic title with a 9-2 victory against Canada.

Wellington Castillo hit a two-run homer for the Dominicans, who went 8-0 to win the 2013 title. Before the game, manager Tony Pena said his team looks better on paper this year.

Bautista singled home a run in the second, singled again in the fifth and hit a three-run homer in the sixth off Dustin Molleken.

"This is a team full of cleanup hitters," Bautista said in Spanish. "Whenever you contribute to the cause, you are happy."

Jose Reyes had three of the

Dominicans' 15 hits. Castillo's homer came in the second inning, when the Dominicans bunched six hits to score four runs off Ryan Dempster.

"That's a pretty good ballclub they ran out there," said Ernie Whitt, Canada's manager. "There are no soft spots for sure."

Carlos Martinez pitched four innings in his first career WBC outing and allowed one run.

The Dominicans were the home team and had the majority of support from a boisterous crowd of 27,388 at Marlins Park, with fans chanting, blowing horns and pounding drums throughout the game.

Dempster, a 16-year major league veteran who came out of retirement to pitch for the Canadians at age 39, lasted only two innings and gave up four

runs. It was his first game since the 2013 World Series.

Italy 10, Mexico 9: At Guadalajara, Mexico, John Andreoli capped Italy's five-run rally in the ninth with a two-run single, lifting his team to a wild 10-9 victory over Mexico on Thursday night in the first game of Group D in the World Baseball Classic.

Israel 4, Netherlands 2: At Seoul, South Korea, Nate Freiman's RBI double sparked a three-run first inning as Israel beat the Netherlands to finish at the top of Pool A in the World Baseball Classic with a 3-0 record.

Australia 11, China 0: At Tokyo, James Beresford hit a grand slam in the eighth inning as Australia overpowered China 11-0 to improve to 1-1 in Pool B.

South Korea 11, Taiwan 8 (10): At Seoul, South Korea, Euiji Yang's sacrifice fly scored Jaewon Oh with the go-ahead run in the top of the 10th, and South Korea earned a bittersweet victory over Taiwan after being eliminated from pool play.

In early Friday games:

Cuba 4, Australia 3: At Tokyo, outfielder Alfredo Despaigne hit a grand slam in the fifth inning to lead Cuba over Australia and into the second round.

Japan 7, China 1: At Tokyo, Seiji Kobayashi and Sho Nakata both hit two-run homers as Japan beat China to finish Pool B with a 3-0 record.

Two-time champion Japan will open the second round against the Netherlands on Sunday.

TCU knocks off No. 1 Kansas in Big 12 quarterfinals

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Desmond Bane had 16 points, hitting three free throws with 2.5 seconds left, to help TCU stun top-ranked Kansas 85-82 in the Big 12 quarterfinals Thursday.

The eighth-seeded Horned Frogs (19-14) blew an 11-point halftime lead, and still trailed 80-76 with just over a minute remaining. But a parade of free throws knotted the game, and Alex Robinson's driving layup gave TCU the lead back with 31 seconds left.

Frank Mason answered with a pair of free throws for Kansas (28-4), but the Horned Frogs got the ball to Bane in the corner and he was fouled by Svi Mykhailiuk while putting up a shot.

He calmly drained all of them, and Devonte Graham's long three at the buzzer bounced harmlessly off the rim as the Horned Frogs leaped off their benches to celebrate a massive upset of the No. 1 seed.

They'll play No. 23 Iowa State, which topped Oklahoma State, in Friday's semifinals.

Kenrich Williams had 13 points, Robinson had 13 and Brandon Parrish had 12 for the Horned Frogs, who caught a break when Jayhawks coach Bill Self suspended Josh Jackson for the game. Jackson was cited for traffic violations in the latest incident involving the star freshman.

No. 2 Villanova 108, St. John's 67: At New York, Donte DiVincenzo had 25 points, Kris Jenkins added 24 and the Wildcats cruised past the Red Storm in the Big East quarterfinals.

No. 3 UCLA 76, Southern California 74: At Las Vegas, Isaac Hamilton scored 22 points, and the Bruins held on for the win in the Pac-12 quarterfinals.

No. 5 Oregon 80, Arizona State 57: At Las Vegas, Dillon Brooks scored 22 points, Tyler Dorsey added 21 and the Ducks pulled away in the second half to beat the Sun Devils in the Pac-12 quarterfinals.

No. 6 North Carolina 78, Miami 53: At New York, Isaiah Hicks had 19 points and the Tar Heels beat the Hurricanes in the Atlantic Coast Conference

quarterfinals.

No. 7 Arizona 92, Colorado 78: At Las Vegas, Lauri Markkanen scored 20 points, Allonzo Trier added 19 and the Wildcats pulled away in the second half to beat the Buffaloes in the Pac-12 quarterfinals.

Kansas State 70, No. 9 Baylor 64: At Kansas City, Mo., Barry Brown had 21 points, D.J. Johnson added 13 and the Wildcats beat the Bears in the Big 12 Tournament, clinching not only a spot in the semifinals but most likely an NCAA berth.

No. 11 West Virginia 63, Texas 53: At Kansas City, Mo., Jevon Carter scored 21 points, his team cranked up its trademark defense and the Mountaineers cruised past the Longhorns in the Big 12 quarterfinals.

No. 14 Duke 81, No. 10 Louisville 77: At New York, Jayson Tatum scored 25 points and Grayson Allen provided an emotional lift during a second-half comeback to help the Blue Devils beat the Cardinals in the Atlantic Coast Conference quarterfinals.

No. 16 Florida State 74,

Virginia Tech 68: At New York, Dwayne Bacon scored all but two of his 17 points in the second half and the Seminoles finally overpowered the Hokies in the Atlantic Coast Conference quarterfinals.

Xavier 62, No. 18 Butler 57: At New York, Trevon Bluiett scored 23 points, including a tough foul-line jumper that broke the game's final tie with 16 seconds left, and the Musketeers beat the Bulldogs in the Big East quarterfinals.

No. 22 Notre Dame 71, No. 21 Virginia 58: At New York, Bonzie Colson had 21 points and 10 rebounds and the Fighting Irish beat the Cavaliers for the first time since joining the Atlantic Coast Conference, topping them to reach the tournament semifinals.

No. 23 Iowa State 92, Oklahoma State 83: At Kansas City, Mo., Monte Morris was an assist shy of the second triple-double in Big 12 Tournament history, leading the Cyclones past the Cowboys in the quarterfinals.

Morris had 21 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists for the Cyclones (21-10).

Ducks' GK Bernier gets hundredth win

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Jonathan Bernier made 43 saves for his 100th NHL win as Anaheim stopped the Chicago Blackhawks with a 1-0 victory on Thursday.

Corey Perry scored in the second period as the Ducks ended the Blackhawks' seven-game winning streak despite being outshot 43-26 on the night. Corey Crawford blocked 25 shots as the Blackhawks lost for only the second time in their last 14.

Bernier's second shutout this season and 14th of his career helped the Ducks move ahead of idle Edmonton for second place in the Pacific Division. Bernier made his sixth straight start with John Gibson sidelined by a lower-body injury.

"These are the type of games as a goalie, on the road in this type of building against a good team, you need to show up and bring your 'A' game," Bernier said. "I felt really good tonight."

Perry stopped a 10-game scoring drought with his 12th goal at 17:44. Perry hadn't connected since scoring twice on Feb. 9 at Buffalo.

"We weathered the storm in the first pe-

riod and our goalie stood tall," Perry said. "Got to give him a lot of credit."

Chicago wasted a chance to overtake Minnesota for the top spot in the Central Division and Western Conference. The Wild lost 4-1 at Tampa Bay.

Despite ample energy, the Blackhawks just couldn't finish against Bernier.

Blackhawks defenseman Niklas Hjalmarsson returned after missing four games with an upper-body injury. He was paired with Swedish countryman Johnny Oduya, who played in his first game since being reacquired on Feb. 28 from Dallas. He had been resting an ankle injury.

Hjalmarsson and Oduya often played together on Chicago's 2013 and 2015 Stanley Cup teams.

Sharks 4, Capitals 2: Logan Couture scored two power-play goals as host San Jose beat Washington in a matchup of division leaders.

Lightning 4, Wild 1: Nikita Kucherov scored two goals, the first on a power play less than seven minutes into the game, helping host Tampa Bay beat Minnesota.

Flames 5, Canadiens 0: Brian Elliott had 24 saves for his first shutout of the sea-

son while Johnny Gaudreau had a goal and three assists as host Calgary beat Montreal for its eighth consecutive victory.

Hurricanes 4, Rangers 3: Rookie Sebastian Aho scored the go-ahead power-play goal with 7:32 remaining in host Carolina's comeback victory over New York.

Senators 3, Coyotes 2 (OT): Erik Karlsson scored his second goal of the game 40 seconds into overtime to lift visiting Ottawa past Arizona for its fifth straight victory.

Maple Leafs 4, Flyers 2: Frederik Andersen made 36 saves while Tyler Bozak had a goal and an assist as host Toronto beat Philadelphia.

Avalanche 3, Devils 2: Francois Beauchemin scored with 1:14 left to lift host Colorado hand New Jersey its ninth straight loss.

Islanders 4, Canucks 3 (OT): Andrew Ladd scored at 1:33 of overtime as visiting New York defeated Vancouver.

Kings 3, Predators 2 (OT): Iginla scored his second goal on a power play with 1:26 left in overtime as host Los Angeles rallied for a victory over Nashville.

Westbrook leads way as Thunder top Spurs

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Russell Westbrook had his 31st triple-double of the season to help the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the San Antonio Spurs 102-92 in the NBA on Thursday night.

Westbrook had 23 points, 13 rebounds and 13 assists to match Wilt Chamberlain's 1967-68 campaign for the second-most triple-doubles in a season.

Victor Oladipo scored 20 points, and Enes Kanter added 14 points and 10 rebounds for the Thunder. They snapped a four-game losing streak.

Kawhi Leonard scored 19 points for the Spurs, who had won nine straight. San Antonio dropped two games behind the Golden State Warriors in the race for the best record in the NBA.

Tony Parker, Manu Ginobili and Kyle Anderson sat out

for the Spurs. Ginobili rested, Parker had back stiffness and Anderson had a sprained right knee.

Pistons 106, Cavaliers 101: Andre Drummond had 20 points and 16 rebounds, and visiting Detroit scored the first 13 points of the fourth quarter before holding off injury-plagued Cleveland.

LeBron James had 29 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists — and threw down over a half-dozen tremendous dunks — but the Cavaliers have now lost three straight and five of their last seven. J.R. Smith played for Cleveland after a thumb injury had kept him out since December, but Kevin Love and Kyle Korver were out, and the Cavaliers lost Andrew Bogut earlier in the week with a broken leg.

Clippers 114, Grizzlies 98: Austin Rivers scored 20 points and Chris Paul added 19 points and seven assists to lead Los

Angeles past host Memphis.

The Clippers solidified their hold on the fifth seed in the Western Conference, while Memphis continued a skid that has reached four straight.

J.J. Redick scored 15 points, Jamal Crawford and Blake Griffin had 14 apiece, and Griffin added 12 rebounds. Marc Gasol led Memphis with 20 points, and Zach Randolph had 18 points and 11 rebounds.

Lakers 122, Suns 110: D'Angelo Russell scored 28 points, including six three-pointers, as visiting Los Angeles snapped an eight-game losing streak by beating Phoenix.

Jordan Clarkson added 19 for the Lakers, who stopped an 11-game skid in Phoenix, where they hadn't won since Jan. 5, 2011. Los Angeles lost 137-101 in its previous game in Phoenix on Feb. 15, the most one-sided Suns win in the series' history.

The Lakers took the lead to start the second half and were up by as many as 21 Thursday night. A late Phoenix run made it a seven-point game before Los Angeles scored the final five points.

Devin Booker scored 23 for the Suns. Marquese Chriss added 18, and T.J. Warren finished with 17.

Trail Blazers 114, 76ers 108 (OT): Jusuf Nurkic had a career-high 28 points and 20 rebounds as host Portland beat Philadelphia in overtime. Nurkic also had eight assists and six blocks in Portland's fourth straight win.

Damian Lillard finished with 24 points but did not make a three-pointer, snapping a streak of 42 games with at least one three. Philadelphia rookie Dario Saric had a season-best 28 points, while Robert Covington added 24 in the 76ers' sixth loss in seven games.