

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## US airlifts Syrian rebels into key city

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military airlifted hundreds of Syrian fighters into a key area west of Raqqa held by the Islamic State group to launch an assault on a strategically vital town and nearby dam, the Pentagon said Wednesday.

The Syrian Arab Coalition fighters aim to seize the town of Tabqa and its dam on the Euphrates River, which would cut the final supply and communications lines that the Islamic State group has from the western region of the country into its de facto capital of Raqqa, said Eric Pahon, a Pentagon spokesman. Tabqa is about 25 miles west of Raqqa along the Euphrates River.

A spokesman for the Operation Inherent Resolve coalition said the overnight troop insertion Wednesday caught Islamic State fighters in the area off guard and the U.S.-backed rebels had already captured several villages in the countryside

near Tabqa. The operation to liberate the city, the dam and a military airfield nearby is expected to last several weeks, said Army Col. Joseph E. Scrocca, a Kuwait-based coalition spokesman.

"The fight is raging on and ... we are pretty confident the [Syrian Arab Coalition] is going to get this accomplished," he said.

U.S. special operation advisers accompanied the militia fighters on the aircraft as they were inserted behind enemy lines, but Scrocca would not say whether any American personnel are operating on the ground in the area.

The Syrian Democratic Forces announced on social media that Marines were participating in the assault.

"The role of coalition force has not changed," Scrocca said, adding they are operating "off the front lines" of the battle.

"They are there to support and advise local forces," he said. "They are not engaged in direct combat."

Marines are supporting the operation with artillery fire from an undisclosed location in Syria and Army AH-64 Apache attack helicopters are also supporting the operation, Scrocca said.

The latest operation is a continuation of shaping the battlefield in preparation of the assault on Raqqa. It is unclear when that assault will begin or precisely what forces will attack the city. The Operation Inherent Resolve coalition has long backed the Syrian Democratic Forces, which consists of the Syrian Arab Coalition and the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia. But Turkey, a NATO ally, has objected to the inclusion of YPG forces in the operation and wants its own forces and Syrian rebel groups that it supports to participate in the offensive.

Pentagon officials have said those negotiations are ongoing.

The insertion of Syrian Arab Coalition troops into Tabqa is the first air assault that the United States has conducted with partner forces in Syria,

Scrocca said. Syrian Democratic Forces leadership planned the operation with help from American advisers.

The assault represents an uptick in the operations around Raqqa. The U.S.-backed forces have seized some 1,500 square miles of territory around the Islamic State group capital since November without prolonged heavy fighting. But the terrorists are likely to staunchly defend the area around Tabqa to retain access to the outside world.

"This is a huge, high-priority operation that is essentially going to cut off the terrorists," Pahon said. The Islamic State group's "caliphate is crumbling at this point."

Since November, the coalition has conducted about 300 airstrikes around Tabqa, which have killed some 1,000 Islamic State fighters and destroyed more than 50 tactical vehicles, Pahon said.

## US probes 2nd strike in Syria linked to civilian deaths

*The Washington Post*

BEIRUT — The U.S. military said Wednesday that it was investigating claims that it had bombed a school in northern Syria where activists said dozens of civilians had been killed.

The strike, which hit a building in the rural north of Raqqa province, marked the second time in a week that U.S. forces have been accused of causing mass civilian casualties in its air campaign against extremist groups.

U.S.-backed troops are also battling Islamic State militants

on the ground after the extremist group made the city of Raqqa its de facto capital during the summer of 2014.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitoring group, said at least 33 bodies had been pulled from the rubble at the school, which activists from the area said had been used to house at least 50 families fleeing violence elsewhere in the country.

Pentagon spokesman Eric Pahon said the United States had been active in the area and was examining whether it was responsible for the strike. But separately, Col. Joseph Scrocca,

a spokesman for the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition, said he had received "no indication" that the bombing raid had killed civilians. "Coalition forces work diligently to be precise in our airstrikes," he said.

Dozens of people were killed last week in U.S. strikes on al-Qaida targets that hit a prayer hall in the town of Jinah, in Aleppo province. The Pentagon said scores of al-Qaida militants were killed in the attack, but residents reported that the dead were civilians who had gathered for a religious class.

On Wednesday, the Pentagon insisted those strikes had killed

dozens of terrorists. "Intelligence indicated that al-Qaida leaders used this partially-constructed community meeting hall as a gathering place, and as a place to educate and indoctrinate al-Qaida fighters," said Maj. Adrian Rankine-Galloway, a Pentagon spokesman.

The disputed strikes come as the White House considers lifting rules put in place by the Obama administration to avoid civilian deaths, foreshadowing a more aggressive approach to dealing with terrorist threats overseas.

# Lawmakers want services to adopt 1 stronger DOD social media policy

BY TARA COPP  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — A House lawmaker on Tuesday urged leadership from all four military services to create one Defense Department policy for social media and questioned them about maintaining separate guidelines and the lack of enforcement amid an online photo-sharing scandal.

Leaders from the Marines, Navy, Air Force and Army testified during a hearing held by a House armed services subcommittee about each service's social media policies and the training in place after reports that some Marines and sailors had participated in a Facebook site called Marines United that distributed nude photos of women in the service.

"To think that we need separate social media policies from one service to another makes no sense," said Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., who is a member of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel, which held the hearing. "If you take a picture without the consent of someone and then post it on the internet with their name, rank and serial number,

it would seem to me that whether you are a Marine or sailor or any one of the other services, you are violating the law."

To date, more than 20 women have come forward saying images of them were taken or posted without their consent on the webpage, according to the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. The Facebook group had a reported 30,000 members before it was taken down. The NCIS said it has identified 1,253 Marines United page members, including 725 active-duty and 150 Reserve Marines, as well as 15 sailors.

Now the Air Force and Army are also investigating whether airmen or soldiers were similarly targeted or participated in the sharing of nude photographs of female servicemembers on websites. The Coast Guard and FBI have also joined the investigation. Maj. Gen. Jason Evans, the Army's director of military personnel management, said Tuesday that a Tumblr site that might have displayed photos of Army personnel and other services is now part of a multi-service task force investigation.

Service leaders told lawmakers that they are reviewing training and social media policies.

# Mattis seeks budget boost

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on Wednesday went to the Senate to make the case for a boost in defense spending this year and met with skepticism from Democrats and indications of the tough political road ahead.

Mattis and Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, urged an appropriations subcommittee to support President Donald Trump's request for an immediate \$30 billion in supplemental funding for more troops, training, hardware and overseas operations that they say could help patch up declining military readiness.

"I think we will double the number of deployable army brigades. ... If you support it, we will deliver a readiness that helps us should we need to fight," Mattis told the Senate panel.

The \$30 billion could be added to a \$578 billion defense spending bill that the House passed earlier this month to fund the Defense Department from May through September. The Senate has yet to weigh in. Congress must approve new Defense Department spending legislation by April 28 when the current budget expires.

Democrats questioned the \$30 billion, saying the Trump administration has made a request that would bust federal spending caps and could trigger deep sequester cuts.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said the supplemental request would violate the Budget Control Act of 2011, which sets spending limits, and trigger 5 percent cuts across the board at the Defense Department. "I can't imagine you would want to go through this exercise," Durbin said.

However, Congress could decide to rake the \$30 billion into an overseas war account, which unlike the base defense budget is not subject to the spending caps.

Many Democrats also deeply oppose Trump's proposal to boost overall defense spending by \$54 billion in 2018 by making the same amount of cuts to foreign aid and domestic programs — a coming political fight that began to emerge Wednesday.

Under the president's plan, the State Department would be cut by 28 percent.

Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., the top Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, said not enough details of the cuts are known and it could affect the defense spending request. The White House has said it expects to release a full budget proposal in May.

# DOD denies trying to quash waste study

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department on Tuesday denied it tried to quash a 2015 study that found it could save \$125 billion in noncombat administrative programs but admitted it has so far found only a small fraction of those savings.

The department hopes to save \$7.9 billion during the next five years through recommendations in the study of back-office waste, which itself cost about \$9 million to complete, the Defense Department's acting deputy chief management officer told a House panel.

The study's original findings as well as a perceived lack of action from the Defense Department riled members of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which held the hearing on the fate of the report as President Donald Trump's administration plans a \$54 billion boost in defense spending by cutting other federal programs such as foreign aid.

"I think the one thing I would take unequivocal issue with is that the report was in any way suppressed," said David Tillotson III, who is acting as the Defense Depart-

ment deputy chief management officer. "It was actively discussed within the department at the time and it has formed the basis of discussion since that time."

The study found more than 1 million Defense Department employees perform non-combat-related work, such as human resources, finances, health care management and property management, and \$125 billion could be saved by making those operations more efficient. The study was conducted by the Defense Business Board, an advisory body to the Pentagon, and included work by two contracted groups.

The saved money could be enough to fund 50 additional Army brigades or 10 Navy carrier strike group deployments, the Defense Business Board found.

So far, most of the projected \$7.9 billion in savings will come from information technology purchases and services contracts, according to Tillotson.

He said finding more savings might be difficult due to the Pentagon's long-running resistance to efficiency and audit efforts, and that lawmakers could help with legislation such as a new round of base realignments and closures to help the department shed excess and costly real estate.



# Deadly attack in London treated as terrorism

Associated Press

LONDON — A vehicle mowed down pedestrians on London's Westminster Bridge on Wednesday. Around the same time, a knife-wielding attacker stabbed a police officer and was shot on the grounds outside Britain's Parliament, sending the compound into lockdown.

The head of counterterrorism at London's Metropolitan Police, said at least three people had died in what has been declared a terrorism incident, including a police officer. The attacker also died.

Mark Rowley said about 20 people were wounded. A search was underway to make certain no other attackers are in the area — though police believe there was only one attacker.

"We are satisfied at this stage that it looks like there was only one attacker. But it would be foolish to be overconfident early on," Rowley said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

Rowley said the dead policeman was one of the armed officers who guard Parliament.

The other victims were on Westminster Bridge.

The threat level for international terrorism in the U.K. was already listed at severe. Wednesday was the anniversary of suicide bombings in the Brussels Airport and subway that killed 32 people, and the latest events echoed recent vehicle attacks in Berlin and Nice, France.

Prime Minister Theresa May, who was rushed from Parliament within minutes, was to chair a meeting of the government emergency committee. London Police Commander B.J. Harrington said a full counterterrorism investigation was underway.

The incident in London unfolded within sight of some of the city's most famous tourist sites, including the London Eye, a large Ferris wheel with pods that overlook the capital. It stopped rotating and footage showed the pods full as viewers watched police and medical crews on the bridge, which has at its north end Big Ben and Parliament, two iconic symbols.

# Afghanistan wants more US troops to help fight militants

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Afghanistan wants the United States to send more forces to help meet shortfalls in the battle against the Taliban and the Islamic State group, the nation's top diplomat said Tuesday.

Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani welcomed a recent call by U.S. Gen. John Nicholson, the top American commander in Afghanistan, for a few thousand more troops from the U.S. or other coalition partners to help break the stalemate in the war-torn country.

The Trump administration has not yet said if it will send more forces in response to Nicholson's comments. Some 8,400 U.S. troops are currently deployed in Afghanistan, performing counterterrorism operations against insurgents and training the Afghan army. The war is in its 16th year.

Citing a deadly attack this month on a military hospital in Kabul, Rabbani said Afghanistan needs U.S. help in addressing "military shortfalls," through increased training, ground and air capabilities, and reconnaissance and intelligence support. The attack was launched by the Islamic State with the Taliban.

"We stand confident that the

new U.S. administration under President [Donald] Trump will remain strategically engaged and continue its support," Rabbani said at the Atlantic Council think tank ahead of a gathering in Washington of the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State group. He described Nicholson's call as "an appropriate decision considering the prevailing security challenges still facing us."

In a sign of how major powers are vying for influence in the region, Rabbani said Russia is planning a 12-nation conference on Afghanistan. The former Soviet Union engaged in a disastrous decadelong occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Rabbani said the U.S. had been invited but didn't know if it would attend. The State Department said it hasn't yet decided on its participation.

In congressional testimony last month, Nicholson said Russia has been publicly legitimizing the Taliban and seeking to undermine the United States and NATO in Afghanistan.

Rabbani said Russia and Iran have both told Kabul they have been in contact with the Taliban to encourage a return to the negotiating table.

They deny providing the Taliban material support.

# Va. governor pardons 'Norfolk Four' sailors

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Virginia's governor pardoned four former sailors who became known as the "Norfolk Four," ending a decades-long fight to clear the men of rape and murder convictions based on intimidating police interrogations.

A spokesman for Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the governor granted absolute pardons for the men in the 1997 rape and killing of Michelle Moore-Bosko. DNA evidence linked another man, Omar Ballard, to the

crimes. He acknowledged that he was solely responsible and is serving a life sentence.

The "Norfolk Four" got their name because they were stationed at the Navy base in Norfolk. Their case drew widespread attention when their innocence claims were backed by dozens of former FBI agents, ex-prosecutors and crime novelist John Grisham.

Three of the men — Danial Williams, Joseph Dick and Derek Tice — were granted conditional pardons in 2009 by then-Democratic Gov. Tim Kaine and released from prison because of doubts about their guilt,

but their convictions remained on the books. Eric Wilson had already been released.

A federal judge vacated Williams and Dick's convictions in October, declaring that "no sane human being" could find them guilty. Tice had his convictions erased in 2009.

A full pardon from McAuliffe was the only remedy for Wilson after he failed to get his conviction overturned in court because he had already completed his sentence when he brought the challenge.

# Dems complain Gorsuch's answers not specific enough

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — On a glide path toward confirmation, Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch declared Wednesday that “when you put on the robe, you open your mind” as he faced a final day of questions from the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Frustrated Democrats, unable to get much out of the Denver-based appeals court judge over 11 hours of questioning a day earlier, suggested they might not vote to confirm him later this month. Regardless, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has made clear this week that he will see that Gorsuch is confirmed one way or another in the GOP-controlled Senate.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, of California, top Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, gave voice to widespread Democratic complaints Wednesday about Gorsuch, President Donald Trump's pick for the high court.

Gorsuch has said repeatedly that he would adhere to the rule of law and respect the independence of the judiciary, but he has refused to

address specifics on any number of issues, from abortion and guns, to allowing cameras in the courtroom, to the treatment of the federal judge nominated last year to the Supreme Court vacancy but denied a hearing by Republicans.

“What worries me is you have been very much able to avoid any specificity like no one I have ever seen before,” Feinstein told Gorsuch. “And maybe that’s a virtue, I don’t know. But for us on this side, knowing where you stand on major questions of the day is really important to a vote ‘aye,’ and so that’s why we pressed and pressed and pressed.”

Gorsuch repeated his general commitments to adhering faithfully to precedent, the law and independence.

“I care about the law, I care deeply about the law and an independent judiciary and following the rules of the law,” he told Feinstein. “And that’s the commitment I can make to you, I can’t promise you more and I can’t guarantee you any less.”

## Pressure increasing on health care vote

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump and House leaders are revving up pressure on balky conservatives and other Republican lawmakers as crunch time approaches on the party’s health care overhaul bill, a drive GOP leaders concede they can’t afford to lose.

A day before the House planned votes on the measure, Trump was expected to continue hunting support for what would be a significant achievement for his young presidency. But underscoring the bill’s uncertain fate, a senior administration official said that 20 to 25 House Republicans remained opposed or undecided. That’s a grave figure since united Democratic opposition means the measure crashes if 22 GOP lawmakers vote “no.”

“If we keep our promise, people will reward us,” House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., told reporters Tuesday of GOP vows to demolish former President Barack Obama’s health care law that the GOP has assailed since its enactment in 2010. “If we don’t keep our promise, it will be very hard to manage this,” the speaker said.

The Republican legislation would halt Obama’s tax penalties against people who don’t buy coverage and shrink the federal-state Medicaid program for low earners, which the statute has expanded. It would provide tax credits for medical bills, though generally skimpier than the aid Obama’s statute provides. It also would allow insurers to charge older Americans more and repeal tax boosts the law imposes on high-income people and health industry companies.

The House Rules committee was meeting Wednesday to set the terms of debate.

The panel was expected to let the chamber vote on revisions that top Republicans concocted to win votes. These include adding federal aid for older people.

## Teen apparently raped on Facebook Live

Associated Press

CHICAGO — A 15-year-old Chicago girl was apparently sexually assaulted by five or six men or boys on Facebook Live, and none of the roughly 40 people who watched the live video reported the attack to police, authorities said.

The video marks the second time in recent months that the Chicago Police Department has investigated an apparent attack that was streamed live on Facebook. In January, four people were arrested after a cellphone footage showed them allegedly taunting and beating a mentally disabled man.

Police learned of the latest alleged attack when the girl’s mother approached the head of the police department, Superintendent Eddie Johnson, on Monday afternoon as he was leaving a department station in the Lawndale neighborhood on the city’s West Side, department spokesman An-

thony Guglielmi said Tuesday. She told him her daughter had been missing since Sunday and showed him screen grab photos of the alleged assault.

He said Johnson immediately ordered detectives to investigate, and the department asked Facebook to take down the video, which it did.

Guglielmi said Tuesday that detectives found the girl and reunited her with her family. He said she told detectives that she knows at least one of her alleged attackers, but it remained unclear how well they knew each other. He said investigators are questioning several people, but no one is considered a suspect yet and no arrests have been made.

He said Johnson was “visibly upset” after he watched the video, both by its content and the fact that there were “40 or so live viewers and no one thought to call authorities.”

Investigators know the

number of viewers because the count was posted with the video. To find out who they were, though, investigators would have to subpoena Facebook and would need to “prove a nexus to criminal activity” to obtain such a subpoena, Guglielmi said by email.

A spokeswoman for Facebook, Andrea Saul, said she had no specific comment on the Chicago incident but that the company takes its “responsibility to keep people safe on Facebook very seriously.”

“Crimes like this are hideous and we do not allow that kind of content on Facebook,” she said.

Jeffrey Urdangen, a professor at Northwestern University’s law school and the director of the school’s Center for Criminal Defense, said it isn’t illegal to watch such a video or to not report it to the police. He also said child pornography charges wouldn’t apply unless viewers were downloading the video.



# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Residents evacuated after explosives found

**HI** HONOLULU — Hundreds of Honolulu residents were evacuated for hours on Sunday after a family found a cache of old grenades and pipe bombs in a deceased relative's closet, police said.

Officers responded to a report of someone wanting to turn in his brother's firearm and ammunition about noon, police told The Honolulu Star-Advertiser. When they arrived, they were shown the grenades and pipe bombs and began clearing the six-story condo building. Police also evacuated a building across the street and told other nearby residents to stay inside. The evacuation order was lifted about 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Hawaii News Now reported.

## Ex-principal indicted in theft schemes at school

**MD** BALTIMORE — Prosecutors said a former Baltimore high school principal indicted in schemes to steal from her school made dozens of ATM withdrawals from a school account at a casino.

The state prosecutor's office announced Monday that a grand jury returned indictments charging Leslie Lewis, the former principal of Baltimore Community High School, with theft, misappropriation by a fiduciary and conspiracy. Albert Fluker, a former teacher at the school, is also charged with theft and conspiracy.

Prosecutors say Lewis stole more than \$13,000 from an account she set up for the school, making 49 ATM withdrawals at Maryland Live Casino. They allege that Lewis also used deceptive purchase orders to steal more than \$40,000 in technology, and that Lewis and Fluker worked together to steal four televisions from the school.

## Woman escapes from trunk of moving car

**AL** BIRMINGHAM — A woman who escaped a carjacker by jumping from the trunk of her moving car said she used the light on her insulin pump to find the latch that allowed her to flee.

Alabama nursing student Brittany Diggs told NBC's "Today" show Monday that the man who abducted her threatened to kill her repeatedly before she got away.

Police are still searching for the suspect who they say kidnapped Diggs, 25, at gunpoint outside her apartment in Birmingham, Ala., on March 14.

Diggs said the man forced her to drive and tried to withdraw cash from ATMs before putting her in the trunk. Diggs said she jumped out as the car left a gas station, an escape captured by surveillance cameras.

## Man loses challenge to law on knife possession

**NE** LINCOLN — A Nebraska man has lost his challenge to a state law barring felons from having knives.

The Lincoln Journal Star reported that U.S. District Judge John Gerrard dismissed Wa'il Muhannad's complaint last week, saying, among other things, that Muhannad failed to present facts backing up his assertion that the law was too vague.

Muhannad filed the complaint last July. He had a meatpacking business in Dodge County for about five years until he discovered he couldn't legally have a knife with a blade longer than 3.5 inches because he's a felon.

Muhannad said in his complaint that the law was too broad, and his attorney argued that the law doesn't take into account legitimate uses for knives other than as weapons.

## Fugitive nabbed after using CVS rewards card

**FL** KEY WEST — Key West police detectives nabbed a man wanted in Georgia for an assortment of violent crimes — including felony strangulation and aggravated assault with a weapon — after he used his CVS rewards card and tipped off authorities to his whereabouts.

The Keynoter reported that Cobb County sheriff's officials contacted Key West police March 16, saying Jamaal Seymour, 37, was possibly in Key West and wanted on a number of counts.

Shortly after, Seymour used his rewards card at the CVS store on the island. By 10 p.m. that night, detectives spotted and approached him. Police said the man took off running, but they caught him a short time later.

He was booked locally for resisting arrest, giving false ID to an officer and being a fugitive.

## Man accused of killing wife in store parking lot

**GA** AUBURN — Police are investigating a fatal shooting outside a grocery store in a suburb northeast of Atlanta.

WSB-TV reported that Barrow County Sheriff Jud Smith said the shooting happened Saturday about 5:20 p.m. in the parking lot of an Ingles grocery store in Auburn.

According to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, a 911 call came from the store about a domestic disturbance. Officers arrived to find Dorothy Russell, 51, of Statham, shot to death in a car.

Police allege Russell was fatally shot by her husband, Darin Russell, 50. The GBI said Russell fled in a Mercedes but was caught 45 minutes later.

He has been charged with one count of murder and is being held in the Barrow County Detention Center.

## 'Psychic' pleads guilty to stealing \$1.4 million

**OH** CLEVELAND — An Ohio woman who purported to be a psychic reader has pleaded guilty to aggravated theft for what authorities say was a scam that bilked a dozen people of \$1.4 million in cash and valuables to protect them from dark forces.

Gina Miller could face as many as eight years in prison when she's sentenced next month. She entered her plea as part of a deal after being indicted on 28 counts that included racketeering last September. A judge has ordered Miller to forfeit \$24,000 in cash, four Rolex watches, a diamond ring, designer purses, cellphones, computers and other seized items.

## Satanic Temple ad hits corporal punishment

**TX** FORT WORTH — A group called The Satanic Temple has put up a billboard in North Texas that criticizes the use of corporal punishment in schools.

The Massachusetts-based group placed the ad in Springtown, a community northwest of Fort Worth where a male assistant principal in 2012 spanked two female high school students. The incident prompted the school board to alter its policy. Corporal punishment is still allowed, but a parent or guardian must approve its use.

The billboard says, "Never be hit in school again."

The Satanic Temple said its members don't worship Satan. Instead, they oppose "arbitrary authority," supernatural beliefs and superstitions.

From wire reports

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Reporting  
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and Military News

# US gets past Japan for its 1st WBC final

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Luke Gregeron's final strike breezed past Nobuhiro Matsuda, and the rain-drenched American players celebrated on the field while a soaked crowd roared through the evening mist.

A daylong downpour couldn't dampen this resilient United States club or its fans, who will finally get to root for the home team in a World Baseball Classic championship game.

Brandon Crawford scored the tiebreaking run when Matsuda bobbled Adam Jones' grounder to third in the eighth inning, and the United States reached the WBC final for the first time by beating Japan 2-1 on Tuesday night at rainy Dodger Stadium.

Andrew McCutchen drove in an early run for the U.S., which played Puerto Rico for the title Wednesday night. Puerto Rico edged the Netherlands 4-3 in 11 innings Monday.

"It means a heck of a lot," said McCutchen, the Pittsburgh Pirates slugger. "We've got a great group of guys on

this team who have dedicated this time to be able to try and win some ballgames. Sacrifices had to be made, and there are no egos when that door opens. That's what's good about this team. Everybody is a superstar on this team. There are no egos."

The World Baseball Classic final has been played in the United States in each of its four editions, but the home team had never been able to play America's pastime on what has become its biggest international stage. The U.S. only reached the semifinals once before, in 2009.

While manager Jim Leyland's current roster is missing Clayton Kershaw, Mike Trout and many other American superstars, the All-Star-laden group that decided to participate has won two straight elimination games to earn a chance for the U.S.' first crown.

"Coming into this event, I didn't really want to talk about the fact that the United States has never won it [and] they've never gone to the finals," Ley-

land said. "I didn't think that was a big deal. I wanted this, for the players, to be a memory. I've talked a lot about it. Make a memory. Hopefully it's a real good one, regardless of the results (Wednesday). I know it is for me. It's been an absolute honor."

To reach the final, the Americans had to persevere through an uncharacteristic Los Angeles rain that drenched the playing field several hours before game time. They also had to beat a gifted Japanese team at its own game: pitching, defense and small ball.

Ryosuke Kikuchi hit a tying homer off reliever Nate Jones in the sixth inning for Japan, but the two-time WBC champions were twice let down by their normally sturdy defense.

McCutchen opened the scoring with an RBI single in the fourth moments after Kikuchi's two-base error at second. In the eighth, Crawford likely would have been out at the plate on Jones' innocent grounder, but Matsuda didn't field it cleanly and had to throw to first.

"Well, two plays," Japan manager Hiroki Kokubo said through a translator. "Honestly, there were some mistakes, and then a run was scored. ... The team that makes mistakes will lose. That's what it means. I cannot blame them, though, for doing that."

Japan won the first two WBC tournaments before losing in the 2013 semifinals, and Kokubo's current team was unbeaten in this event.

"The players really did their very best," Kokubo said. "I really appreciate it. It's do-or-die, one semifinal."

Tanner Roark pitched four scoreless innings of two-hit ball before Leyland pulled him on the instructions of the Washington Nationals, who limited Roark to 50 pitches because he hadn't faced live hitters in nine days.

"I felt good enough to stay out there," Roark said.

Gregeron, the Americans' sixth reliever, worked a perfect ninth inning after Pat Neshek escaped a two-on jam in the eighth.

## College basketball changing due to impact of NBA

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Rick Pitino watched in amazement as the Michigan Wolverines made 11 second-half three-pointers, many from well beyond the arc.

The first comparison that came to mind was the NBA's Golden State Warriors.

"The amazing thing to me is you look at the size of the players that Michigan has, and they shoot it like backcourt players. That's what's really coming on," Pitino said last weekend in Indianapolis, where the Cardinals were eliminated by Michigan.

"I made a concentrated effort this past year in our recruiting to recruit bigs who could shoot because we don't have bigs who can shoot now."

Pitino can find the NBA's influence on just about any college game.

The shot clock has been shortened, the three-pointer has been embraced and everyone from 5-foot-6 Keon Johnson of Winthrop to 6-10 Moe Wagner of Michigan seems comfortable shooting from long range.

Scoring is up, defenses are being stretched thin and coaches are trying to adapt to change by recruiting bigger, better shooters and fewer true centers.

College basketball has its own version of small ball going these days.

The Wolverines are not small by any means, but all five starters and each of their top six scorers are capable three-point shooters.

Disbelievers can watch Fri-

day's 92-91, first-round victory over Oklahoma State, the game that caught Pitino's attention.

The Cardinals did a solid job in Sunday's second-round game giving up only six threes, though Wagner's deep shot helped send Michigan to the Sweet 16 for Thursday's Midwest Regional showdown against Oregon.

Style is only part of the ongoing change.

Two years ago, the NCAA approved a 30-second shot clock and followed the NBA's lead by using timeouts called within close proximity of a media timeout as the scheduled stop. It also stripped a second-half timeout from teams.

The numbers reveal just how much and how fast things have changed.

Through the first two rounds

of this year's tournament, teams are averaging 74.22 points per game.

If that average is maintained through the next four rounds, it would be the highest tournament scoring average since 1993 (74.31) and a 6.45-point per team increase over the 2015 average (67.77 ppg).

Last year, the first with the new shot clock, teams averaged 71.85 points in tournament play.

High-scoring offenses are only part of the equation.

Pitino believes defenses are starting to add NBA staples.

Instead of using traps and pressure to force turnovers, he said, many teams are simply trying to take precious seconds off the shot clock with "soft pressure," a notion he advocated during two stints as an NBA coach.



# No. 11 Xavier lowest seed remaining

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Point guard Edmond Sumner eased himself down the hallway from Xavier's practice gym on Monday using a pair of crutches to protect his surgically repaired knee. Somehow, his team has figured out how to move on without him.

The Musketeers (23-13) are the biggest surprise in the Sweet 16. Double-digit wins over Maryland and Florida State set them on course for a rematch against Arizona (32-4) and former coach Sean Miller on Thursday in the West region at San Jose.

Xavier is the lowest seed left in the tournament at No. 11. After losing significant players at midseason, the Musketeers have reinvented themselves and followed Trevon Bluiett's

lead to a pair of NCAA Tournament wins.

It's stunning for a team that was considered a potential play-in candidate heading into the Big East Tournament. They've got their confidence back, and it shows.

"I think confidence is everything in the game of basketball," coach Chris Mack said on Monday, wearing a blue shirt that said "Winner Stays."

Mack's eighth season as head coach — he took over when Miller went to Arizona — has been his most challenging. He's had to reinvent his lineup repeatedly since midseason, moving players into unaccustomed roles.

Senior guard Myles Davis was suspended for the first semester while facing misdemeanor charges for damaging

his former girlfriend's property. He returned for three games, didn't make a shot and ended his career.

Sumner tore his left ACL on Jan. 29, costing the Musketeers their second-leading scorer. Bluiett, one of the top scorers in the Big East, severely sprained an ankle in mid-February, missed most of three games and was limited in others.

The Musketeers went into a tailspin in one of the nation's toughest basketball conferences — 70 percent of Big East teams reached the NCAA Tournament. They lost six in a row, their worst slump in 35 years, and their depleted lineup was running on fumes as March approached.

Xavier beat DePaul to end the regular season, beat the Blue Demons again to open

the Big East Tournament, then knocked off Butler and narrowly lost to Creighton in the semifinals.

"To be able to beat Butler kind of sparked us, gave us a little bit of energy, a little bit of hope," Bluiett said. "We knew when we got them that we were starting to get our mojo back, everything was starting to come back."

Having Bluiett back to form has been a huge boost. He scored 50 points in the two NCAA Tournament wins, going 15-for-29 from the field and 8-for-15 from beyond the arc against defenses geared to contain him.

"You can see his confidence level," Mack said. "He just makes us a very, very difficult team to defend when he's on the floor."

## Madness can often bring best, worst performances

Associated Press

Everything's magnified in March.

A player who has been slumping all season can quickly put that behind him with a couple of big performances in the NCAA Tournament. A team that has struggled can suddenly change its reputation by heating up in the postseason.

North Carolina's Joel Berry II, Florida's Devin Robinson and South Carolina's entire team are some of those on the annual tournament roller coaster heading into the Sweet 16.

Berry has struggled to find his shot and Robinson has produced some of the best performances in his college career.

Before last week, the Gamecocks were known for having their stingy defense and a suspect offense. But they've averaged 90.5 points in the first two games of the tournament to reach the Sweet 16 for the first time in the NCAA Tournament's current format. They scored 65 points and shot 71.4 percent in

the second half of an 88-81 victory over Duke.

"We wouldn't be in the Sweet 16 if we were a bad offensive team," South Carolina coach Frank Martin said after the Duke game. "Now, do we shoot 71 percent, what did we shoot, 71 for a half? No, nobody does. But that's why they call this thing March Madness."

Here are some other statistical trends involving teams in the Sweet 16.

**UCLA'S ability to avoid turnovers:** UCLA leads all Division I teams with a 1.93 assist-turnover ratio, but the Bruins have been particularly adept in this area during the NCAA Tournament. The Bruins have totaled 46 assists and only 10 turnovers in two NCAA Tournament games, including a season-low three turnovers against Cincinnati. Before the tournament, UCLA was committing 11.5 turnovers per game. The Bruins next face Kentucky, which has forced a total of 19 turnovers through the first two rounds of the tournament.

**Butler's three-point shoot-**

**ing:** Butler is shooting 47.1 percent (16-for-34) from beyond the arc in the tournament, well above its season percentage of .369. Avery Woodson is 8-for-14 from three-point range in two tournament games. Butler now must face North Carolina, which has allowed its first two NCAA Tournament foes to shoot 31.3 percent (15-for-48) from three-point range.

**North Carolina G Joel Berry II's slump:** Berry injured his ankle in a first-round victory over Texas Southern, which may explain why he's struggled to make his shots thus far in the tournament. Berry has shot a combined 3-for-21 and has averaged 6.5 points in two tournament games. Berry is North Carolina's second-leading scorer with 14.4 points per game.

**Michigan's rebounding worries:** Michigan has managed to get to the Sweet 16 despite posting a minus-13 rebound margin in its first two NCAA Tournament games. Michigan got out-rebounded 40-21 by Oklahoma State and 37-30 by Louisville. The Wolverines have been out-

scored 38-19 in second-chance points through the first two rounds yet have managed to survive anyway. Michigan next faces Oregon, which has a plus-10.5 rebound margin in the NCAA Tournament.

**Gonzaga's free-throw woes:** Gonzaga has made 72.7 percent of its free throws this season, but the Bulldogs have shot just 57.4 percent (31-for-54) from the line during their first two tournament games. Jordan Mathews has shot 4-for-9, Josh Perkins has gone 1-for-5 and Johnathan Williams is 0-for-4.

**West Virginia's long-range accuracy:** West Virginia has shot 52 percent (13-for-25) from three-point range in the NCAA Tournament. The Mountaineers had made 36.1 percent of their three-pointers before the NCAA Tournament. Jevon Carter has gone 6-for-9 and Tarik Phillip has shot 3-for-6. West Virginia could struggle to maintain that pace against Gonzaga, which ranks seventh nationally in three-point percentage defense.

# Raptors fight back for win over Bulls

Associated Press

TORONTO — The Toronto Raptors fought and scrapped their way to their first victory over the Chicago Bulls in years.

DeMar DeRozan led the way.

DeRozan had 42 points, and the Raptors snapped an 11-game losing streak against the Bulls by rallying for a wild 122-120 overtime win on Tuesday night.

“You don’t want to have something lingering like that and go a couple of seasons where you can’t beat a team,” DeRozan said. “When you’re a competitor, just to have that in the back of your mind, it sucks.”

DeRozan set a franchise record with 38 shot attempts, making 17, and also finished with eight assists. Cory Joseph had 19 points for the Raptors, and Serge Ibaka scored 16 before he was ejected for his role in a memorable fight with Robin Lopez during the third quarter.

Jimmy Butler had 37 points, 10 rebounds and six assists for

the Bulls, and Rajon Rondo scored a season-high 24. It was Chicago’s first loss to Toronto since Dec. 31, 2013.

Following a Butler three-pointer with 3:58 remaining in the third quarter, giving Chicago a 16-point lead, Lopez swatted the ball out of the hand of Ibaka. The two squared up in the middle of a crowd and Lopez swung and missed Ibaka, who returned in kind, barely connecting with the head of the center.

Lopez and Ibaka were ejected following a long review period. Chicago forward Nikola Mirotic and Raptors assistant coach Jamaal Magloire received off-setting technical fouls after getting into a shoving match following the melee.

With Lopez throwing the first punch, Ibaka said he was simply trying to defend himself.

“I’m not just going to be out there and watch a man like him punch me and walk away,” he said after his fourth career ejection.

Lopez was ejected for the sixth time in his career. He said he expects to be suspended.

“I think it was a really physical game, physical game for everybody,” he said. “Just kind of hit the flashpoint.”

**Heat 112, Suns 97:** Hassan Whiteside had 23 points and 14 rebounds before leaving late with a cut on his right hand, and host Miami cruised to the win.

Tyler Johnson scored 17 for Miami (35-36), which had seven players in double figures.

**Warriors 112, Mavericks 97:** Klay Thompson had 23 points with five three-pointers and Golden State earned its 28th road win this season, beating Dallas in a matchup of the Curry brothers.

Stephen Curry, two-time MVP and the older of the brothers, had 17 points and nine assists for the defending Western Conference champion Warriors. Seth Curry had 10 points and is now 0-6 in NBA games against his brother.

**Spurs 100, Timberwolves 93:** Kawhi Leonard scored 20 of his 22 points in the second half, helping San Antonio to the road win.

**Nets 98, Pistons 96:** Brook Lopez made a jumper as time expired to give host Brooklyn the win.

The Pistons, fighting for a playoff spot, wiped out a double-digit deficit in the fourth quarter to tie it at 96 on Tobias Harris’ follow shot with 2.4 seconds left.

**Bucks 93, Trail Blazers 90:** Khris Middleton scored 26 points, and Milwaukee held off host Portland for the victory.

**Pelicans 95, Grizzlies 82:** DeMarcus Cousins enjoyed his most prolific performance yet with host New Orleans, finishing with 41 points and 17 rebounds.

Cousins hit five three-pointers, tying a career high. He made five shots inside while being fouled for three-point plays and had the jubilant home crowd chanting his nickname, “Boogie.”

**Clippers 133, Lakers 109:** At Los Angeles, Clippers star Chris Paul scored 27 points before watching the end of a blowout with his young son on the bench.

## Crosby helps Penguins clinch playoff berth

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — After losing a pair of front teeth, Sidney Crosby wasn’t available to discuss the highlight-reel, one-handed goal he scored in helping the Pittsburgh Penguins clinch their 11th consecutive playoff berth.

Crosby’s teammates had plenty to say about it following the defending Stanley Cup champions’ 3-1 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Tuesday.

Starting from inside his blue line, Crosby picked up a head of steam through the neutral zone and weaved past four Sabres before lifting a one-handed backhand into the top right corner to open the scoring with nine seconds left in the first period.

“The play that everyone screws around doing in prac-

tice, and he does it in games,” Nick Bonino said.

Even Sabres goalie Robin Lehner was left impressed.

“I think most goalies in the league are going to read he’s going to pull that back to his forehand,” said Lehner, who stopped 31 shots. “Probably one or maybe two guys in the league who can score a goal like that.”

Crosby was not in a position to speak after being high-sticked in the face by Evander Kane with 1:25 remaining while attempting to score into an empty net. Crosby went down in the corner clutching his face before eventually getting up and leaving.

**Capitals 4, Flames 2:** Alex Ovechkin had a goal and two assists, T.J. Oshie scored his 30th of the season and NHL-leading Washington beat surging Calgary.

**Devils 3, Rangers 2 (OT):** Joseph Blandisi scored on an odd-man rush with 54.6 seconds left in overtime, and New Jersey handed New York a rare road loss.

**Senators 3, Bruins 2:** Kyle Turris scored twice and Craig Anderson made 33 saves as visiting Ottawa beat Boston to end a four-game losing streak.

**Red Wings 2, Canadiens 1 (OT):** Anthony Mantha scored at 4:10 of overtime to lift visiting Detroit over Montreal.

**Coyotes 5, Lightning 3:** Oliver Ekman-Larsson had a goal and an assist during Arizona’s three-goal third period, Louis Domingue stopped 36 shots and the Coyotes damaged host Tampa Bay’s playoff hopes.

**Hurricanes 4, Panthers 3:** Jeff Skinner scored two goals, including the game-winner

with 3:55 left, to lead visiting Carolina past Florida.

**Jets 3, Flyers 2:** Blake Wheeler and Mark Scheifele each had a goal and two assists, and host Winnipeg edged Philadelphia for its third straight victory.

**Canucks 5, Blackhawks 4 (OT):** Daniel Sedin scored a power-play goal 2:12 into overtime and visiting Vancouver beat Chicago to end a six-game slide.

**Wild 3, Sharks 2:** Martin Hanzal and Charlie Coyle scored 15 seconds apart late in the second period, and host Minnesota stopped a five-game losing streak.

**Blues 4, Avalanche 2:** Magnus Paajarvi and Jaden Schwartz scored in the third period to send St. Louis past host Colorado.