

STARS AND STRIPES®

Tuesday, March 12, 2019

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

In budget, DOD requests large pay raise

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon on Tuesday unveiled its largest-ever budget request, asking Congress for \$718.3 billion that emphasizes the need to modernize the aging U.S. inventory of weapons, begins building a Space Force and would boost troops' pay by 3.1 percent.

President Donald Trump's plan to boost defense spending for the third consecutive year — including some \$32 billion for nuclear programs run by the Department of Energy for a total of some \$750 billion for national defense — calls for a more than \$33 billion increase from fiscal year 2019 defense spending allocated by Congress. The Pentagon's budget proposal for fiscal year 2020 was released one day after the White House unveiled its \$4.7 trillion spending plan for the federal government next year, which would cut domestic spending and foreign aid contributions.

Senior defense officials described their budget plans as "a major milestone" in preparing the military for the great-power

competition that they believe will shape the Pentagon's needs for years to come as rival nations Russia and China build new classes of weapons and seek to challenge the United States' long-held global dominance. The budget is the first of the Trump administration's to focus primarily on potential conflict with near-peer adversaries over the conflicts American troops have been fighting for nearly two decades in places including Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, the officials said.

Acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan, who largely shaped the budget plans in his former role as the department's No. 2, has referred to the 2020 budget proposal as the Pentagon's "masterpiece."

But even with some key lawmakers' endorsement of Trump's plans to increase defense spending, analysts who closely monitor the Pentagon's budget predicted the 2020 proposal was unlikely to pass muster on Capitol Hill.

A major hurdle for the spending plan is the use of the Overseas Contingency Operations account, the Pentagon's war chest of money to be spent for

combat operations that is kept separate from its base budget, for basic defense functions. Another hurdle is the more than \$3 billion in the proposal to help fund Trump's wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Todd Harrison, the director of defense budget analysis at Washington think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies, described the Pentagon's attempt to funnel nearly \$100 billion in base spending through the OCO account as a "gimmick."

Analysts at the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute also criticized the OCO plan, as well as the use of Pentagon funds for Trump's border wall, and they described the overall spending proposal as "flat."

The budget proposal "continues to repair military readiness, but that's it," AEI analysts Mackenzie Eaglen and Rick Berger wrote Monday. "A flat budget only treads water ... and continues the familiar approach of punting today's problems to the future."

In its request, the Pentagon asked Congress for \$545 billion in base defense spending and

roughly \$66.7 billion to fund ongoing warfighting and major training operations including in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and in eastern Europe, where American troops train with NATO partners to deter Russian aggression.

But the Defense Department also asked for another \$98 billion in what it described as OCO funds "for base requirements," money for things such as ammunition and unit-level training exercises that typically would be included in its base request.

The use of OCO money for base functions is designed to skirt congressionally mandated budget caps first introduced in the Budget Control Act of 2011.

The budget proposal also adds a new account, described as an emergency fund that would replenish any military construction funding used in 2019 to pay for Trump's border wall and to rebuild installations damaged last year by hurricanes.

That fund of \$9.2 billion also includes some \$3.6 billion earmarked for new southwest border wall construction next year, should Trump demand it.

Navy board votes to retain Fitzgerald lieutenant

Stars and Stripes

A Navy board of inquiry found no reason to remove from the service a lieutenant charged last year in the fatal collision of the USS Fitzgerald, according to a report Monday by U.S. Naval Institute News.

Lt. Irian Woodley was accused of failing in his duties the day the destroyer collided with a Philippine-flagged container ship in the waters south of Japan on June 17, 2017. Seven

sailors died as a result of the collision.

After an Article 32 hearing in July, the charges against Woodley — dereliction in the performance of duties through neglect resulting in death, negligent hazarding of a vessel and negligent homicide — were dropped. In an Article 32 hearing, like a preliminary hearing in civilian court, a military court rules whether enough evidence exists to take a criminal case to trial.

Woodley was accused of failing to maintain an accurate picture of the vessels around the ship, oversee watch standers in the combat information center and communicate information and recommendations to those driving the ship.

After the charges against him were dropped, Woodley's case went to a board of inquiry to determine whether he should be discharged.

The board's decision Friday is essentially the equivalent of

an acquittal in court, Woodley's lawyer, Lt. Cmdr. Justin McEwen, told USNI News. The board ruled unanimously, 3-0, that the government did not prove a basis for separating Woodley from the service.

"Because the government did not prove basis, the board did not need to answer the question whether Lt. Woodley would be retained or separated. He is automatically retained," McEwen told USNI News.

Coast Guardsman accused of plot pleads not guilty to other charges

The Washington Post

A U.S. Coast Guard lieutenant accused of using his government computer to plot a domestic terrorist attack pleaded not guilty to drug and weapons charges during his latest court appearance Monday.

Christopher Hasson, 49, appeared in U.S. District Court in Maryland almost two weeks after he was indicted on additional weapons charges related to what the government says were silencers found among a stockpile of weapons seized from his basement apartment.

Hasson was arrested Feb. 15 on drug and gun charges after a computer program the Coast Guard uses flagged suspicious activity tied to his work devices, federal law enforcement officials said. Hasson has not been

charged on any terrorism-related counts, but prosecutors allege that he was planning an attack on politicians and media personalities to advance his white-nationalist views.

Hasson created a spreadsheet of targets and “traitors,” studied the manifestos of mass attackers and conducted internet searches of security protocols for liberal elected officials and of where members of Congress congregate, the government said.

“The defendant intends to murder innocent civilians on a scale rarely seen in this country,” the government said in court documents, adding that investigators believe Hasson called for “focused violence” to “establish a white homeland.”

At a previous hearing, a federal public defender for Hasson,

Julie Stelzig, argued that there was no indication he planned to carry out an attack and that it is not a crime to have negative thoughts.

Hasson did not speak during Monday’s hearing other than to give his age, say he completed two years of college and answer mostly yes-or-no questions from the judge.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Windom said a trial for Hasson could take about five days.

Elizabeth Oyer, a federal public defender for Hasson, represented him on Monday and declined to comment after the hearing.

Separately Monday, Magistrate Judge Charles Day granted the government’s motion to keep Hasson detained during trial.

Navy assists with possible explosive at Guam marina

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

A marina near U.S. Naval Base Guam was evacuated for several hours Tuesday morning while law enforcement authorities checked out a possible explosive device.

Guam’s offices of Homeland Security and Civil Defense received a call reporting the device at Agat Marina around 8 a.m., according to a joint statement released on social media. Agat is in the southwestern corner of the western Pacific island.

A photo posted by the Pacific Daily News newspaper showed the item sitting atop an orange dumpster. It was square and appeared to have some sort of tablet taped to it.

After the item was discovered, the marina and surrounding area were evacuated and roadways were closed, the statement said. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Guam Fire Department, Guam Police Department, U.S. Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal, U.S. Coast Guard Investigative Service and Port Police were called to the scene.

Navy EOD arrived around 9 a.m. and assessed and secured the item, the joint statement and the Pacific Daily News reported.

The area was deemed “all clear” at 12:15 p.m. after authorities confirmed the package was not a threat, U.S. Coast Guard Sector Guam officials said in a statement.

“All precautions were taken to ensure the safety of the public and all responders,” the joint statement said.

“The Agat Marina, surrounding waters and roadways are open and resume normal operations.”

Additional sweeps of the harbor were conducted, Coast Guard officials said. The suspicious package will be turned over to the FBI for analysis.

Recruit screening program scrutinized

The Washington Post

A Pentagon program designed to screen potential recruits with foreign ties, including holders of green cards as well as some U.S. citizens, has prompted questions from military officials about whether it will have detrimental effects on the services, according to emails and documents obtained by The Washington Post.

Defense officials touted the program as a way to speed up vetting of recruits who have what the Pentagon considers “foreign nexus” risks. The process could be completed “in a matter of days or ... in a few weeks, as compared to months and years” required under traditional background checks, according to one Defense Department memo.

The program, which was tested by the Army last summer but has not been implemented, would rely on mining several existing government databases for information.

But the new plan also may come with complications, according to emails obtained by The Post. That would be a concern for a military that has long sought to attract immigrants to meet its recruiting goals in part by promoting the possibility of U.S. citizenship.

Discussions about the program began in earnest after a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction in November ordering the Pentagon to begin sending a backlog of thousands of green card recruits to initial training. The order came after two prospective recruits — one born in China and interested in joining the Navy and one originally from Jamaica who planned to join the Air Force — sued the Pentagon, arguing that monthslong delays in screening had caused them harm.

The program would need approval in court to overcome the injunction. But internally, some defense officials have expressed

concerns that it also will create some delays.

Russ Beland, a senior civilian official in the Navy Department, said in a Feb. 27 email obtained by The Post that the estimates officials were using to determine which recruits needed additional screening “may be far too low.”

After assessing its pool of recruits waiting to go to initial training, the Navy determined that “somewhere between a third and half” could require new screening, he wrote.

“I recognize there are risks from inadequate screening, but there are also risks from gapped billets,” Beland said, using military parlance for empty slots in training.

In response, Lernes Hebert, a senior defense official overseeing personnel issues, said he was committed to working with the Navy Department on exceptions to the policy “if class seats are at risk of going vacant.”

Taliban, US claim peace talks 'progress'

Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — The longest peace talks between the U.S. and the Taliban to end America's 17-year war in Afghanistan concluded Tuesday night in Qatar, with both sides saying progress had been made.

The nearly two weeks of talks produced two draft agreements between the militants and the U.S. government on a "withdrawal timeline and effective counterterrorism measures," American envoy Zalmay Khalilzad wrote on Twitter. The diplomat said he'd go to Washington and meet with other concerned parties, likely including the Afghan government, which did not take part in the 13 days of face-to-face talks in Qatar.

"The conditions for #peace have improved," Zalmay wrote. "It's clear all sides want to end the war. Despite ups and downs, we kept things on track and made real strides."

The Taliban issued a statement, similarly saying "progress was achieved" on both of those issues. It stressed no cease-fire deal had been reached, nor any agreement for the Taliban to speak to the Afghan government.

A Taliban official at the talks, who earlier spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity, said the main sticking point remained when U.S. forces would withdraw. The Taliban want a withdrawal within three to five months, while the U.S. is saying it will take 18 months to two years, he said.

Another sticking point would be a demand from America that the Taliban guarantee Afghanistan would never again host militants that would launch an attack against it. The Taliban have said they can agree to a general promise but remains unwilling to identify specific groups in their pledge.

Osama bin Laden's successor in al-Qaida, Ayman al-Zawahri, is believed to be hiding in Afghanistan.

ISIS calls on followers across globe to avenge siege in Syria

Associated Press

BAGHOUZ, Syria — Besieged by U.S.-backed forces in their last foothold in eastern Syria, Islamic State militants are calling on supporters across the world to stage attacks in their defense, according to a newly released audio recording.

The recording, purportedly from ISIS, came as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces continued to face stiff resistance Tuesday from ISIS gunmen as U.S.-backed fighters try to push deeper into the village of Baghouz, on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River.

The brief, minute-and-a-half recording, released by ISIS supporters on social media and reported by the SITE Intelligence Group late Monday, said men, women and children in Baghouz are being subjected to a "holocaust by the crusaders," which

is militant jargon for the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS.

In the audio, an unidentified ISIS militant calls on Muslim "brothers in Europe and in the whole world" to "rise against the crusaders and ... take revenge for your religion." As the man speaks, cracks of gunfire can be heard in the background, apparently meant to suggest that he is in Baghouz.

"Crusaders' warplanes" and "Kurdish atheists" are attacking his people, the man says. The recording's authenticity couldn't be independently verified.

The U.S.-backed forces resumed their offensive against ISIS on Sunday night after thousands of civilians and hundreds of fighters left the last sliver held by the extremists. Since then, 38 militants and three SDF fighters have been killed,

according to SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali.

Argish al-Deiri, an SDF commander in Baghouz who identified himself by his nom de guerre, told The Associated Press on Tuesday that his men advanced overnight and secured some positions on the edge of a tent settlement where ISIS militants are making their last stand.

"We entered the camp, then stopped," he said. "There was resistance, and we withdrew. The planes struck the ammunition depot," setting off explosions that halted the push.

He said ISIS militants were fighting back with heavy weapons, rifles and sniper fire, forcing SDF fighters to slow their advance so that "you don't lose your men." He said he hoped the ISIS fighters will surrender in the coming "few days."

Rich parents charged in college entry scheme

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department on Tuesday charged more than 30 wealthy people — including two television stars — with being part of a long-running scheme to bribe and cheat to get their kids into big-name colleges and universities.

The alleged crimes included cheating on entrance exams as well as bribing college officials to say certain students were coming to compete on athletic teams when those students were not in fact athletes.

The criminal complaint paints an ugly picture of high-powered individuals committing crimes to get their children into selective schools. Among those charged are actresses Felicity Huffman, best known for her role on the television show "Desperate Housewives," and Lori Loughlin, who appeared on "Full House," according to court documents.

Authorities said the crimes date back to 2011, and the defendants used "bribery and other forms of fraud to facilitate their children's admission" to numerous college and universities, including Georgetown, Yale University, Stanford University, the University of Texas, the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles, among others. One of the cooperating witnesses, according to the court documents, is a former head coach of Yale's women's soccer team, who pleaded guilty in the case nearly a year ago and has since been helping FBI agents gather evidence.

Some of the 32 defendants are accused of bribing college entrance exam administrators to facilitate cheating on tests — by having a smarter student take the test, or providing students with answers to exams or correcting their answers after they had completed the exams, according to the criminal com-

plaint filed in federal court.

Loughlin and her husband, fashion designer Mossimo Giannulli, were accused of paying \$500,000 in bribes so their two daughters would be designated as recruits for the University of Southern California crew team — even though they were not part of the team. That helped the pair get into USC, according to the complaint.

Huffman is accused of paying \$15,000 — disguised as a charitable donation — to the Key Worldwide Foundation so her oldest daughter could participate in the scam. A confidential informant told investigators that he advised Huffman he could arrange for a third party to correct her daughter's answers on the SAT after she took it. She ended up scoring a 1420 — 400 points higher than she had gotten on a PSAT taken a year earlier, according to court documents.

More 737s grounded amid crash probe

Associated Press

HEJERE, Ethiopia — Britain joined a growing number of countries grounding a new Boeing plane involved in the Ethiopian Airlines disaster as a global team of investigators began picking through the rural crash site Tuesday.

Some airlines cited worried customers for grounding the Boeing 737 Max 8 as experts chased details on why the plane crashed shortly after takeoff Sunday, killing all 157 on board.

Ethiopian Airlines had issued no new updates on the crash as of late afternoon as families around the world waited for answers. Some insights into the disaster and its cause could take months, aviation experts said.

Oman, Norwegian Air Shuttle and South Korean airline Eastar Jet were the latest to halt use of the Boeing 373 Max 8. Malaysia, Australia and Singapore suspended all flights into or out of their countries.

The U.S.-based Boeing has said it has no reason to pull the popular aircraft from the skies, and it does not intend to issue new recommendations about the aircraft to customers. Its technical team joined American, Israeli, United Arab Emir-

Army captain among those killed

Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Army captain was among the 157 people killed in a plane crash outside the capital of Ethiopia on Sunday.

Antoine Lewis, 39, whose family says he was stationed in Ottawa, Canada, had served in Afghanistan. He was one of eight Americans on board the Ethiopian Airlines flight en route to Kenya, which crashed shortly after takeoff, Chicago's ABC 7 News reported.

Lewis, who was on vacation to do Christian missionary work, was born and raised in Matteson, Ill., in a family of nine children, the local news station reported.

"He went doing the things that he loved, that he had a passion for," his mother, Antoinette Lewis, told the station. "His passion was just to make a better world, make a better place,

both here and our mother country."

A married father of a 15-year-old son, Lewis planned to start a business or charity and build a home in Africa after retiring from the military, family said. He had made several trips to the country, they said.

He had joined the Army as an enlisted soldier and later earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees, his father, Rodney Lewis, said. "He was also stationed in South Korea. He was a military man; he loved it; he was moving up through the military."

The soldier's wife, Yalena Lopez — also an Afghanistan veteran — told the local station she was still in disbelief, calling her husband a loving man who was trying to become a better version of himself each day.

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ates, Kenyan and other aviation experts in the investigation led by Ethiopian authorities.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration said it expects Boeing will soon complete improvements to an automated anti-stall system suspected of contributing to the deadly crash of another new Boeing 737 Max 8 in October and to update training requirements and related flight crew manuals.

Safety experts have cautioned against drawing too many comparisons too soon with the Lion Air crash of the same model that killed 189 people in Indonesia.

The Ethiopian Airlines plane crashed in clear weather six minutes after taking off for Nairobi.

It should take five days before any victims' remains are identified, Ethiopian Airlines spokesman Asrat Begashaw

told the AP. The dead came from 35 countries and included dozens of humanitarian workers.

Investigators on Monday found the jetliner's two flight recorders at the crash site. An airline official, however, told the AP one recorder was partially damaged.

Ethiopian Airlines grounded its remaining four 737 Max 8s until further notice as "an extra safety precaution."

US withdraws last of embassy personnel from Venezuela

Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — The United States announced late Monday that it is pulling the remaining staff from its embassy in Venezuela, citing the deteriorating situation in the South American nation.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the decision as Venezuela struggles to restore electricity following four days of blackouts around the country and a deepening political crisis.

The U.S. has led an international effort to oust socialist President Nicolas Maduro and replace him with opposition leader Juan Guaido, who vows to hold a new presidential election. Guaido is backed by some 50 countries, while Maduro maintains support from countries such as China, Russia

and Cuba.

Maduro had ordered all U.S. diplomats to leave Venezuela in late January because of its support for Guaido, but he retreated and allowed them to stay. The U.S. still withdrew dependents of embassy personnel as well as some of the staff. Pompeo said the remaining diplomats would be out of Venezuela by the end of the week.

The move came after another day of chaos as power outages that began Thursday evening continued to cause problems for Venezuelans, leaving them with little power, water and communications.

People converged on a polluted river to fill water bottles in Caracas, and scattered protests erupted in several cities.

On Monday, schools and businesses were

closed, long lines of cars waited at the few gasoline stations with electricity and hospitals cared for many patients without power. Generators have alleviated conditions for some of the critically ill.

Maduro said on national television Monday night that progress had been made in restoring power in Venezuela. He also said two people who were allegedly trying to sabotage power facilities were captured and were providing information to authorities, though he gave no details.

Guaido, who heads the opposition-controlled congress, and the United States say Maduro's claims that the U.S. sabotaged the power grid with a "cyberattack" are an attempt to divert attention from the government's own failings.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

All-female honor flight to visit memorials

RI PROVIDENCE — An upcoming honor flight from Rhode Island will be entirely female for the first time.

Honor Flight “Victory” will head to Washington next month with veterans from World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War and from Panama and Kuwait. The veterans range in age from 47 to 96, and will be accompanied by guardians who are all women as well.

Their honor flight will include a visit to the World War II Memorial and the Women’s Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery, among other stops.

The Rhode Island Fire Chief’s Honor Flight is organizing the free trip for the veterans. The nonprofit has been taking local veterans to Washington memorials since 2012.

Dad whose baby choked is acquitted

FL MIAMI — Jurors in Miami acquitted a man who was charged with manslaughter after his 6-month-old son choked on a lollipop.

The Miami Herald reported a jury decided late last week that the death of Jermaine Marcell Levy’s son Marcell Jr. was accidental and not the result of reckless behavior.

Miami-Dade Assistant Public Defender Adam Saper said the “tragic accident” never should have been charged as a crime. He said the baby died on Father’s Day 2018 as his father tried to resuscitate him.

Levy, now 20, was arrested after police said he hit the baby’s mother in the mouth before kidnapping the boy, who he had never taken care of. An arrest warrant says Levy was homeless and couldn’t provide formula for the child and gave him a lollipop.

2 hurt when pole falls during soccer tourney

AR CLARKSVILLE — Authorities in western Arkansas said a referee and a student were injured when strong winds toppled a light pole during a high school soccer tournament.

The injuries happened Saturday afternoon during a high school boys soccer tournament in Clarksville, about 100 miles northwest of Little Rock. School officials said teams from Mena and Dardanelle were playing when the wooden light pole broke and fell to the ground.

Officials said a referee suffered a broken leg and a Mena student suffered superficial injuries. Both were taken to a hospital in Clarksville.

The school canceled the tournament and closed the field after the pole fell.

Dynamite might be used on ice jams

NE OMAHA — Officials said ice jams could be blasted with dynamite to prevent river flooding in eastern Nebraska.

The Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District in Omaha has arranged for a private contractor whose explosives experts would drop dynamite on jams from a helicopter.

District general manager John Winkler said the rain and wind in the forecast will play a factor in whether an explosives crew can be flown over the rivers.

He said people living along the rivers’ edges should elevate their possessions and move valuable boats and vehicles out of harm’s way.

‘Shawshank’ actors due at anniversary

OH MANSFIELD — Some cast members of the “The Shawshank Redemption” are planning to reunite in Ohio for the film’s 25th anniversary.

The Cincinnati Enquirer reported Mansfield is hosting tours and events in August to celebrate the anniversary of the movie that was filmed almost entirely in the northern Ohio city.

Actors scheduled to appear for the reunion include Bob Gunton, who played Warden Norton, William Sadler, who played Heywood, and Mark Rolston, who played Bogs.

Sites featured on the tours include the Ohio State Reformatory and the Shawshank Oak Tree Field. The tree used in some of the film’s iconic scenes was toppled by high winds in 2016.

The 1994 film will be screened on Aug. 16 at the Renaissance Theatre, where it premiered.

New coalition provides athletic shoes for kids

LA MONROE — A new coalition is providing athletic shoes for 40 children at one Louisiana elementary school.

LSU AgCenter nutrition agent Markaye Russell said members learned that children were coming to the office at Barkdull Faulk Elementary School in Monroe, crying because their shoes were too small and hurt their feet or were falling apart.

She says in a news release that those problems made it hard for the children to participate in physical education classes or run and play at recess. Physical activity lowers the risk of obesity, which is a big problem in Louisiana.

Monroe City School Board member Jennifer Haneline proposed the project in September to the Ouachita Parish Healthy Communities Coalition.

30 years for man who killed wife over pizza

MS BRANDON — A Mississippi man was sentenced Thursday to 30 years in prison for shooting and killing his wife after an argument over heating a pizza.

Rankin County District Attorney John Bramlett Jr. told media outlets that John Preston Finch, 54, was sentenced on second-degree murder charges. Finch was convicted of shooting Amy Renee Stewart on Dec. 31, 2016.

Authorities said sheriff’s deputies arrived at a house near Pelahatchie to find the door open and a blood-covered Finch standing over Stewart’s body. Finch showed officers a single-barrel shotgun, initially saying the gun fired by accident. He later told deputies he and Stewart argued over the pizza and Finch shot her.

2 horses found dead; 10 in poor health

CO COLORADO SPRINGS — Authorities said they found two dead horses and 10 that were in “various stages of emaciation” at a property near Colorado Springs.

The Gazette reported El Paso County sheriff’s deputies searched the property Monday after the Rural Enforcement Outreach Team received multiple tips about animal neglect.

Authorities seized the living horses and took them to a boarding facility approved by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

From wire reports

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Wofford win gives bubble teams relief

Associated Press

Wofford made plenty of NCAA Tournament at-large candidates nervous before doing them all a favor.

The 20th-ranked Terriers trailed most of the way before closing with a 20-3 run to outlast UNC Greensboro 70-58 on Monday night in the Southern Conference Tournament championship game at Asheville, N.C.

Wofford has won 20 consecutive games and entered Monday 14th in the NET rankings, which have replaced the RPI as a factor in NCAA Tournament selection. So the Terriers almost certainly had done enough to warrant an NCAA Tournament bid even if they'd lost Monday.

But a UNC Greensboro victory likely would have given the Southern Conference multiple bids and reduced the number of available at-large invitations for potential bubble teams such as Indiana, Belmont and North Carolina State.

Of course, there's still the possibility the Southern Conference could get more than one school in the 68-team field anyway.

UNC Greensboro (28-6) is hoping it can take a spot from

one of those other bubble teams. The Spartans, who entered Monday 57th in the NET rankings, can make a pretty strong argument.

They won a Southern Conference semifinal with Furman, which owns a 25-7 record and was ranked in the Associated Press Top 25 earlier this season. They led Wofford for more than 33 minutes before fading down the stretch.

History suggests that might not be enough. The Southern Conference has never received an NCAA Tournament at-large invitation.

Here's a look at the rising and falling fortunes of some other bubble teams:

Clemson: The Tigers (19-12) strengthened their credentials by ending the regular season Saturday with a 67-55 victory over Syracuse. Clemson finished 9-9 in Atlantic Coast Conference competition to tie North Carolina State for eighth place in the league standings. Those two teams will meet Wednesday in an ACC Tournament matchup of bubble teams.

Georgetown: The Hoyas still have plenty of work to do but helped their cause Saturday by winning 86-84 at No. 23 Marquette, which was ranked 16th at the time of the game.

Georgetown (19-12) has won three of its last four games but must fare well in the Big East Tournament to have any realistic chance of making the field.

Indiana: The Hoosiers (17-14) went 8-12 in Big Ten competition but ended the regular season with four straight victories, including an 89-73 rout of Rutgers on Sunday. Indiana still has work to do and has a Big Ten Tournament game on Thursday against Ohio State, another team on the bubble.

Mississippi: A three-game skid had Ole Miss (20-11) sliding into bubble territory, but the Rebels likely secured an NCAA bid Saturday by rallying to win 73-68 at Missouri.

Saint Mary's: The Gaels (21-11) kept their at-large hopes alive by defeating San Diego 69-62 in a West Coast Conference semifinal late Monday night. That still might not be enough. Saint Mary's entered Monday night's game 37th in the NET rankings, but most bracket projections have suggested the Gaels will need to upset No. 1 Gonzaga in the WCC championship game Tuesday to reach the NCAA Tournament.

Alabama: After ending the regular season with three straight losses, Alabama (17-14) likely needs to make a deep

run in the Southeastern Conference Tournament. Alabama faces Ole Miss in its first game Thursday.

Florida: The Gators (17-14) followed up a five-game winning streak by losing three straight to fall back onto the bubble.

Furman: The Paladins won at Villanova early this season and entered Monday 41st in the NET, but their semifinal loss to UNC Greensboro could put them behind the Spartans in the Southern Conference pecking order if the selection committee chooses to give that league multiple bids.

Ohio State: Although the Buckeyes (18-13) rallied from a 23-point deficit to force overtime Sunday against Wisconsin, they still fell 73-67 for their third straight loss. Ohio State finished the regular season 8-12 in Big Ten play.

Texas: The Longhorns (16-15) have impressive nonconference wins over North Carolina and Purdue, but they're barely over .500 and have dropped four of their last five games. The tailspin continued Saturday with a 69-56 loss to fellow bubble team TCU. They'll need to do some damage in the Big 12 Tournament.

College basketball roundup

Gonzaga blows out Pepperdine in WCC semi

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Zach Norvell Jr. doesn't believe there is a team in the country that can compete with No. 1 Gonzaga when it plays its best game.

The Bulldogs made a strong case to back the junior guard's boasts Monday night.

Norvell scored 18 points and top-ranked Gonzaga beat Pepperdine 100-74 in the semifinals of the West Coast Conference Tournament.

"When guys are clicking, we're on the same page, and just sharing the ball, Coach yells at us a lot 'Just make the right basketball play,' Norvell said. "You're rewarded when you play the game the right way. And I think that's something we've been trying

to do a lot."

The top-seeded Bulldogs outrebounded Pepperdine 37-28, outscored the Waves 13-2 in second-chance points, 29-13 in bench points, and dominated the No. 8 seed in fast-break points, 16-2.

Gonzaga (30-2) will look for its seventh straight WCC title Tuesday when it faces Saint Mary's.

Rui Hachimura scored 16 points, Brandon Clarke added 15 and Josh Perkins and Corey Kispert each scored 11 for Gonzaga.

"Just a terrific approach by the guys," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "We had a lot of days off, you always wonder how that is going to play out. And to their credit, they came out and attacked the moment and really stayed with it. Even after half-

time, they did a great job of really keeping the throttle down. Couldn't have went any better as far as how we wanted to start this tournament."

Iona 81, Monmouth 60: Asante Gist had 22 points, Tajuan Agee added 18 and top-seeded Iona defeated Monmouth to win the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference title for the fourth straight time.

Iona (17-15) is the first men's team to win four straight league titles and has won 10 straight games heading into the NCAA Tournament. The Gaels were the top seed for the 10th time and have won four of their 12 conference titles as the No. 1 seed. The top seed had not won the tournament since Siena in 2010, the longest drought of any conference in the country.

NFL free agency roundup

Offers rolling in 2 days before contracts

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Nick Foles is headed to Jacksonville, Landon Collins to Washington and Trent Brown to Oakland.

The big-money offers for NFL free agents began Monday, two days before they can sign contracts. Foles brings a Super Bowl pedigree to quarterbacking the Jaguars, and Brown has a championship ring as he moves to the Raiders' offensive line at left tackle. Safety Collins heads a few hours south from the New Jersey Meadowlands, where he could haunt his former team twice a year.

All of Monday's deals were confirmed by people with knowledge of the agreements who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because nothing can be official until Wednesday. More deals were leaking out Tuesday as well.

Foles has agreed to sign a

four-year, \$88 million contract with the Jaguars. The deal includes \$50.125 million guaranteed and could be worth up to \$102 million with incentives as he replaces Blake Bortles, who threw 103 touchdown passes in five seasons but was known more for inaccuracy and inconsistency that led to Jacksonville's offensive instability. Bortles is expected to be released this week before a \$1 million roster bonus comes due Sunday.

The Redskins agreed to sign the 25-year-old Collins to a six-year, \$84 million deal with \$45 million guaranteed. He led the Giants with 96 tackles last season, and his 437 since entering the NFL in 2015 are the most among safeties in that time, but the Giants opted not to give him the franchise tag. Collins fills one of Washington's biggest needs on a defense that ranked 17th in the league last season.

Brown was a real find for New England before last season, and his payday will come with the Raiders after agreeing to a four-year deal worth \$66 million. He will receive \$36.75 million guaranteed in the richest contract ever for an offensive lineman.

Also:

■ DeSean Jackson is close to returning to Philadelphia. The Eagles have agreed to acquire the wide receiver from Tampa Bay along with a 2020 seventh-round draft pick for a sixth-round pick this year. The deal is contingent upon Jackson agreeing to a new contract. Five years ago, then-Eagles coach Chip Kelly released the three-time Pro Bowl pick following his best season.

The Eagles also have agreed on a three-year contract with defensive tackle Malik Jackson, who spent the past three seasons with the Jaguars after

playing his first four with Denver.

■ Seven-time Pro Bowl linebacker Terrell Suggs is leaving the Ravens. The 36-year-old Suggs has played all 16 of his seasons in Baltimore and said at the end of the 2018 season he wanted to spend his entire career with the Ravens. That won't happen.

■ Kansas City reached agreement with safety Tyrann Mathieu on a \$42 million, three-year deal. The 26-year-old Mathieu was selected by Arizona in the third round of the 2013 draft after a standout career at LSU. He showed glimpses of his ball-hawking, playmaking abilities with the Cardinals, earning a Pro Bowl selection during the 2015 season, but also dealt with his share of injuries.

He tore ligaments in his left knee in 2013 and in his right knee in late 2015.

FIFA study backs 48-team World Cup, Qatar sharing

Associated Press

LONDON — A FIFA feasibility study concluded the 2022 World Cup can expand to 48 teams by using at least one of Qatar's neighbors as an additional host, and found there is a low legal risk to changing the format and an additional \$400 million in revenue could be generated.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of the 81-page report on Monday that assesses the political, logistical and legal issues surrounding adding 16 teams — a significant change to the format more than eight years after Qatar won the hosting rights. The report was prepared by the governing body so its FIFA Council can agree in principle on expanding the tournament at a meeting in Miami on Friday. A final decision would come in June.

The study identified stadiums in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman,

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that could be used but said Qatar would have to approve which nations it would partner with.

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE severed economic, diplomatic and travel ties with Qatar in 2017, which prevents flights between the countries. The study says FIFA accepts that the ongoing political spat prevents their involvement in the tournament. The AP reported last week that FIFA was looking at Kuwait and Oman as options for games in 2022, given their neutrality in the Gulf diplomatic crisis.

"As it currently stands, the nature of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's relations with Qatar is such that it would be challenging to organize a co-hosted tournament between Qatar and one or more of these countries," the feasibility study states.

"Candidate co-hosts would need to be regarded as sufficiently cooperative," the study adds. "Such co-hosts would not sanction or boycott economically or otherwise any other potential co-host country, including the main host, Qatar."

With logistics already challenged by the existing plan to play 64 games in eight stadiums spread over a 30-mile radius in Qatar, FIFA said two to four additional venues are required in the region "with one or more" nation.

FIFA stipulates that any additional hosts would have to supply government assurances, including on its human rights requirements.

"The involvement of additional neighboring host countries would require certain conditions to be met, in particular the consent of the relevant authorities in the main host country, Qatar," the FIFA

report states. "Therefore, FIFA cannot conclusively stipulate which host countries would be part of a co-hosting arrangement with FIFA and Qatar at this moment."

The study highlights that venues with at least 40,000 seats — for games up to the quarterfinals — were demanded of 2026 World Cup bidders but doesn't come to a conclusion on minimum capacities for 2022. While eight potential additional stadiums are identified in the region in the FIFA study, only two in the UAE, one in Saudi Arabia and one in Kuwait meet the 2026 requirements.

"Whilst a 10-stadium tournament could be considered in the event that up to six matches are played per day during the group stage and matches are held in the same venue on consecutive days, 12 stadiums would still be preferable," the study says.

NBA roundup

Westbrook powers Thunder past Jazz

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Russell Westbrook got into a heated verbal altercation with fans. The All-Star guard ended up having the last word on the court.

Westbrook had 23 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists to lead the Oklahoma City Thunder to a 98-89 victory over the Utah Jazz on Monday night. Dennis Schroder led the way with 24 points to help the Thunder sweep the season series.

An altercation between Westbrook and a pair of Jazz fans in the stands took place early in the second quarter after what he felt was a racial taunt. According to the Thunder guard, they told him to “get down on my knees like I used to.” Westbrook was caught on video cursing at a fan and threatening him and his wife.

Westbrook expressed concern following the game at the verbal abuse he and teammates have received from fans on the road. He said he is done tolerating their disrespect.

“There’s got to be something done,” Westbrook said. “There’s got to be some consequences for those type of people that come to the game just to say and do whatever they want to say. I don’t think it’s fair to the players.”

Jazz security issued multiple warning cards and the team said in a postgame statement that it will be investigating the exchange between Westbrook and fans.

The fan said in a TV interview that neither he nor his wife cursed at Westbrook.

Rockets 118, Jazz 106: James Harden scored 28 points and Eric Gordon added 22 as host Houston cruised to a season-high ninth straight win.

A night after Gordon ended a streak of 43 straight games where Harden led the team in scoring, the Beard was Houston’s top scorer again. But Gordon had another strong outing, making five three-pointers for the third straight game and the fourth in five games.

Clippers 140, Celtics 115: Lou Williams scored 34 points

and became the NBA’s career leader in points off the bench as host Los Angeles beat Boston for its fifth straight win.

Williams came into the game needing 28 points to pass Dell Curry, who had 11,147 points when not starting. Williams surpassed Curry with 9:53 remaining in the fourth quarter with a driving layup.

Nets 103, Pistons 75: Spencer Dinwiddie scored 19 points and host Brooklyn routed Detroit to move into sixth place in the Eastern Conference.

Allen Crabbe finished with 14 points and 10 rebounds, Rodions Kurucs scored 13 points, and Joe Harris and Caris LeVert each added 12 as the Nets took control early in the game and never let up.

Cavaliers 126, Raptors 101: Collin Sexton scored 28 points, Kevin Love had 16 points and 18 rebounds, and host Cleveland routed Toronto.

Toronto’s Serge Ibaka and Cleveland’s Marquese Chriss were ejected for fighting late in the third quarter. Ibaka went to the floor after the two

were battling for position under Cleveland’s basket as the Raptors attempted a full-court pass that sailed out of bounds.

Ibaka shoved Chriss from behind and grabbed near his neck before throwing a punch. Chriss responded with a punch before players from both teams separated the two. Ibaka immediately headed for the locker room and both players were kicked out after the officials conferred.

Wizards 121, Kings 115: Bradley Beal scored 21 of his 27 points after halftime, helping host Washington beat Sacramento despite twice giving back double-digit leads.

Beal added nine rebounds and nine assists for the 11th-place Wizards, who moved within 3½ games of the eighth Eastern Conference playoff spot currently held by idle Miami.

Jabari Parker added 18 points off the bench and Bobby Portis had 17 points and 13 rebounds as Washington began a five-game homestand.

NHL roundup

Greiss makes 31 saves as Islanders shut out Jackets

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Thomas Greiss made 31 saves in his fifth shutout of the season, helping the New York Islanders beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 2-0 on Monday night.

Ryan Pulock and Anders Lee scored as New York (40-22-7) improved its playoff positioning in the tough Metropolitan Division. The Islanders improved to 16-8-1 against divisional opponents.

Columbus (38-28-3) lost for the fourth time in six games, dropping into a tie with Montreal for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. Sergei Bobrovsky made 18 saves, but

the Blue Jackets were unable to get to the steady Greiss.

Sharks 3, Wild 0: Martin Jones made 24 saves to continue his hot streak and lead visiting San Jose to its fifth straight win.

Barclay Goodrow, Tomas Hertl and Logan Couture scored for the Sharks.

Flyers 3, Senators 2: Oskar Lindblom, Michael Raffl and Scott Laughton scored in the second period to lead hard-charging host Philadelphia to the win.

The Flyers have won four of five games to move into the wild-card race.

Hurricanes 3, Avalanche 0: Andrei Svechnikov had

two goals and an assist, Petr Mrazek stopped 38 shots and Carolina earned a rare win at Pepsi Center.

Defenseman Dougie Hamilton also scored as the Hurricanes won in Denver for just the second time in 13 games since Colorado moved into its longtime home for the 1999-2000 season.

Lightning 6, Maple Leafs 2: Tyler Johnson and Cedric Paquette each scored two goals, powering NHL-leading Tampa Bay to another road victory.

Anthony Cirelli and Ondrej Palat also scored for Tampa Bay (53-13-4), and Ryan McDonagh, Yanni Gourde and Jan Rutta had two assists apiece.

Blackhawks 7, Coyotes 1: Brendan Perlini scored three goals against his former team for his first career hat trick, and host Chicago earned its third straight win.

Patrick Kane fired in his 41st goal as Chicago moved within five points of the second wild card in the Western Conference.

Oilers 3, Rangers 2 (OT): Leon Draisaitl scored 35 seconds into overtime and had a pair of assists, helping host Edmonton to the victory.

Connor McDavid and Matt Benning also scored for the Oilers (31-31-7), who improved to 7-2-2 in their last 11 games.