

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Neller: Unexpected costs strain Marines

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Unexpected costs, including major hurricane damage repairs and unplanned deployments to the U.S.-Mexico border, are forcing the Marine Corps to cancel training exercises and will degrade combat readiness, the top Marine general warned.

Gen. Robert Neller said in a memo this week to the Navy secretary that the Marines have pulled out of three military exercises and cut equipment maintenance. And he warned that Marine participation in more than a dozen other exercises will also be canceled or reduced and other cuts will be needed if the service doesn't get budget help.

The problem, said Neller, is "imposing unacceptable risk" to Marine Corps combat readiness.

"Marines rely on the hard, realistic training provided by these events to develop the individual and collective skills necessary to prepare for high-end combat," Neller said

in the memo sent to Navy Secretary Richard Spencer. "Although some effects can be mitigated, the experience lost by these units at a critical time in their preparation cannot be recouped."

In the memo, which was first reported by the Los Angeles Times, Neller asks Spencer for help getting funding freed up for the Marine priorities.

Neller lists nine unplanned factors that led to the problem, but the Marine Corps said that the most significant issue forcing the training cuts is the widespread hurricane damage.

About \$3.5 billion in damages was done to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and surrounding facilities by Hurricanes Florence and Michael.

Neller said that earlier hopes that Congress might approve requests to move larger amounts of money around in the budget now appear unlikely. He called the situation in North Carolina critical, noting that hurricane season begins in June and Ma-

rines and sailors are working in "compromised structures" that must be repaired quickly.

The Defense Department is seeking more than \$2 billion in funding for hurricane damage in the 2020 fiscal year budget. But Neller said the Marine Corps needs more than \$600 million in this current fiscal year to do those needed repairs and address other shortfalls.

The other shortfalls include the ripple effect of the ongoing debate over President Donald Trump's plan to build a wall on the southern border.

There are about 500 Marines deployed to the border mission, where U.S. service members are helping in wall construction, transportation, surveillance and other tasks requested by the Department of Homeland Security.

In addition, the Pentagon is shifting funding from various department budget accounts to pay for the wall construction costs.

Officials: 2 US troops killed in Afghanistan

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Two American servicemembers were killed during an operation in Afghanistan on Friday, the U.S. and NATO forces said, providing no other details on the combat deaths.

The fatalities, which bring to four the number of U.S. troops killed so far this year in Afghanistan, underscore the difficulties in bringing peace to the war-wrecked country even as Washington has stepped up efforts to find a way to end the 17-year war, America's longest.

The U.S. and NATO Resolute Support mission said the names of the servicemembers killed in action were being withheld until after notification of the next of kin, in accordance with U.S. Department of Defense policy. The statement also did

not specify the location of the combat or say who the troops were fighting.

"The incident is under investigation, and we have no additional information to provide," said Sgt. 1st Class Debra Richardson, a Resolute Support spokeswoman.

A Taliban statement later in the day said insurgents engaged in heavy fighting with Afghan and U.S. forces overnight in the northern city of Kunduz. Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman, said the fighting was still underway Friday; he claimed the insurgents had killed as many as three Americans and nine Afghan commandos.

The insurgents often exaggerate their battlefield claims and it was impossible to confirm whether the fighting Mu-

jahid was referring to was the same combat in which the two U.S. servicemembers were killed.

An Afghan lawmaker from Kunduz province, Abdul Wodood Payman, said there was heavy fighting overnight in the Kunduz neighborhood of Taluka, where jet fighters roared overhead and bombings could be heard. He had no additional information.

There are about 14,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan, supporting embattled Afghan forces as they struggle on two fronts — facing a resurgent Taliban who now hold sway over almost half the country and also the Islamic State affiliate, which has sought to expand its footprint in Afghanistan even as its self-proclaimed "caliphate" has crumbled in Syria and Iraq.

In 2001, after the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and ousted the ruling Taliban regime in a matter of weeks. But the Taliban subsequently regrouped while Washington shifted its attention to Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and by 2009, the war had become a stalemate.

The Pentagon has recently been developing plans to withdraw up to half of the American forces still in the country while at the same time stepping up efforts and having the U.S. negotiate with the Taliban. U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, the administration's main negotiator with the Taliban, concluded this month a 13-day session with leaders of the insurgents.

North Korea withdraws from liaison office

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea withdrew from a recently established liaison office in the border city of Kaesong on Friday, the Unification Ministry said, in a blow to hopes that inter-Korean efforts would continue despite the failure of the U.S.-North Korean nuclear summit.

The liaison office opened in September to provide a venue to discuss exchanges and cooperation between the two Koreas stemming from the agreement reached by President Moon

Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during their first meeting last April.

The two sides began several cross-border initiatives and cultural exchanges, but reconciliation efforts have stalled along with the stalemate in talks between Washington and Pyongyang over efforts to persuade the North to give up its nuclear weapons.

North Korea notified the South during a meeting Friday morning that it was pulling out of the office “in accordance with instructions from the superior authority,” the Unification Ministry said in a statement.

The North said it didn’t care if the South Korean side stayed or left and promised to give notice about practical matters later, according to the ministry, which oversees inter-Korean affairs.

“The South Korean government regrets the decision ... and urges the North to return soon so that the South-North joint liaison office can resume normal operations as agreed by the two sides,” the ministry said.

North Korea didn’t give a reason for its decision, but the move comes a day after the U.S. administration slapped

two Chinese firms with sanctions for doing business with Pyongyang — the first punishing measures to be issued since President Donald Trump and Kim failed to reach agreement during their Feb. 27-28 summit in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Kaesong is due north of the Demilitarized Zone that has divided the peninsula since the 1950-53 Korean War ended in an armistice instead of a peace treaty.

Moon has vowed to try to get North Korea and the United States back to the table, but the adversaries have appeared to harden their positions.

House to vote on bill opposing transgender troop ban

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The House will vote next week on a measure rejecting President Donald Trump’s ban on transgender people serving openly in the military, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said Thursday, setting up a likely new congressional rebuke for the White House.

The announcement comes a week after the Pentagon said it would begin enforcing the transgender troop ban for new

applicants starting on April 12. Defense Department officials moved ahead with the change following a January Supreme Court ruling backing Trump’s authority to roll back the previous policy established under President Barack Obama.

The House resolution expresses opposition to the presidential order and urges the Pentagon “to maintain an inclusive policy allowing qualified transgender Americans to enlist and serve in the Armed Forces,” but it would not force

the military to change its policy if passed. The measure, authored by Rep. Joe Kennedy, D-Mass., has 187 cosponsors, all Democrats.

“By implementing a ban that ignores basic science, the sworn testimony of military leadership, and mountains of research, our President and his enablers will inject intolerance into our military, demean their sacrifice and cast doubt on our commitment to that promise,” Kennedy said in a written statement. “This resolution says

to the thousands of trans servicemembers keeping us safe and every other American that their government not only sees them, hears them, and fights with them, but that they count in this country.”

Hoyer, D-Md., said in a written statement, “I hope that all Members will come together next week to vote for it and send a resounding message to this Administration that this ban does not reflect our nation’s values and should not be reinstated.”

Dunford, Google to discuss security concerns involving China

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The top U.S. military officer will meet with Google representatives next week amid growing concerns that American companies doing business in China are helping its military gain ground on the U.S.

Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Wednesday that efforts like Google’s artificial intelligence venture in China allow the Chinese military to access and take advantage of U.S.-de-

veloped technology.

“This is not about me and Google,” Dunford told an audience at the Atlantic Council. “This is about us looking at the second and third order of effects of our business ventures in China, Chinese form of government, and the impact it’s going to have on the United States’ ability to maintain a competitive military advantage.”

Google says its AI activities in China are focused on “education, research on natural language understanding and

market algorithms and the development of globally available tools.”

In a statement last week, Google said it is not working with the Chinese military. The company also said it continues to work with the U.S. government, including the Defense Department, in many areas, including cybersecurity, recruiting and health care.

Dunford’s comments reflect widespread U.S. government worries that any information or data an American company

has or uses as it does business in China is automatically available to the Chinese government and its military.

U.S. companies in China are required to have a cell of the communist party present, said Dunford, adding that “will lead to that intellectual property from that company finding its way to the Chinese military.”

Last week, he and acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan expressed similar concerns during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

Border Patrol: Migrant situation critical

Associated Press

MCALLEN, Texas — A mother cradled a crying toddler as she waited in line with 20 other women to shower. Dozens of fathers quietly held their children's hands in an enclosure made of chain-link fencing.

While these families were held at an overcrowded Border Patrol processing center, a fresh wave of migrants crossed the nearby river separating the U.S. and Mexico and waited for border agents to bring them to the same facility. One Honduran woman carried a feverish 7-month-old baby.

The cycle is repeated multiple times a day. Waves of desperate families are trying to cross the border almost hourly and entering an overtaxed government detention system.

The Border Patrol has become so overwhelmed in feeding and caring for the migrants that it announced plans this week to start releasing some families onto the street in the Rio Grande Valley to ease overcrowding in the processing center, providing the immigrants with a notice to appear at an upcoming court date.

"We have an unprecedented crisis upon us," Robert Perez, deputy commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Border Patrol's parent agency, said in an interview.

The Border Patrol says it made about 66,000 apprehensions of people crossing the border illegally in February, including 36,000 parents and children, an all-time monthly high. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, meanwhile,

said that since Dec. 21, it has released 107,000 family members while they await court dates.

Immigration authorities expect the number of parents and children to surpass 50,000 in March during the traditional spring spike in migration, and potentially reach 180,000 in May, according to two U.S. officials who were not authorized to speak publicly about internal documents.

The Border Patrol ordered expanded medical screenings after the December deaths of two children in its custody. The agency received \$30 million to upgrade its South Texas processing center and additional funding to build a similar facility in El Paso.

Children with fevers, colds and the flu arrive daily at the border with their parents and

sometimes wait for hours for the Border Patrol to pick them up.

President Donald Trump's administration says most adult border-crossers are economic migrants who count on being released if they bring a child and seek asylum.

Immigration agency officials have called for Congress to change laws that would allow them to detain more adults and children and deport people from Central America quicker.

Trump's signature solution — and the reason for his declaration of a national emergency — is a border wall, especially in South Texas, where there are comparatively few barriers. But a border wall would not stop families who aren't trying to evade immigration authorities.

'Heartbeat' abortion law is signed in Mississippi

Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant on Thursday signed one of the strictest abortion laws in the nation — a measure that bans most abortions once a fetal heartbeat can be detected, about six weeks into pregnancy.

Bryant's action came despite a federal judge's ruling last year that struck down a less-restrictive law limiting abortions in the state. The New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights called the new measure "cruel and clearly unconstitutional" and said it would sue Mississippi to try to block the law from taking effect on July 1.

After a bill signing ceremony at the state Capitol, Bryant told reporters that he's not worried about lawsuits.

"They don't have to sue us. It's up to them," Bryant said. "If they do not believe in the sanctity of life, these that are in organizations like Planned Parenthood, we will have to fight that fight. But it is worth

it."

Mississippi is one of several states that have considered bills this year to ban abortions once a fetal heartbeat is found. Abortion opponents are emboldened by new conservatives on the Supreme Court and are seeking cases to challenge *Roe v. Wade*, the court's 1973 ruling that legalized abortion nationwide.

A federal judge in 2018 struck down a Mississippi law that would ban most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy, saying it is unconstitutional. The ruling came in a lawsuit filed by the only remaining abortion clinic in Mississippi.

The law that Bryant signed Thursday says a physician who performs an abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detected could face revocation of his or her Mississippi medical license. It also says abortions could be allowed after a fetal heartbeat is found if a pregnancy endangers a woman's life or one of her major bodily functions.

Texas residents worry about long fire at a chemical plant

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Kristin Crump and her two kids put damp cloths over their mouths on Thursday for the short walk from their suburban Houston front door to their car, defying an order to remain inside because of dangerous fumes coming from burned-out petrochemical tanks a couple of miles away.

For the second time in three days, they were heading to a relative's house, worried about what they've been breathing since a massive fire broke out Sunday at the Intercontinental Terminals Company in Deer Park, Texas, and not believing officials' assurances that they were safe.

"I do not fully trust what they say," said Crump, whose husband later met up with her and the kids, who are 6 and 13 years old. "I do believe what is in the air is very harmful and it can have long-term effects such as cancer and things like that later down the line. I don't think it's worth risking that for

me or my kids to stay there and breathe in this stuff."

Authorities lifted Thursday's order to remain indoors after several hours, saying tests showed the elevated levels of benzene in the air had cleared. But that was little solace to residents who watched for three days as a giant plume of black smoke billowed from the plant, leading authorities to close neighborhoods and cancel classes at area schools.

Several government agencies will continue to monitor the air around the plant, where the tanks that caught fire contained components of gasoline and materials used in nail polish remover, glues and paint thinner. ITC said 11 of the 15 storage tanks in the area where the fire occurred were damaged.

A unified command has been set up to coordinate the efforts of Deer Park city and Harris County workers, along with those of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Coast Guard.

Mo. governor declares state of emergency

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Missouri Gov. Mike Parson declared a state of emergency Thursday following flooding that left several people stranded and continues to cause damage and strain levees in several Midwest states.

Parson's action will allow state agencies to work directly with local officials responding to flooding. Parson, along with the state's Emergency Management Agency director and other officials, planned to meet with local leaders and survey damage Thursday.

"The rising floodwaters are affecting more Missouri communities and farms,

closing more roads and threatening levees, water treatment plants and other critical infrastructure," Parson said in a statement. "We will continue to work closely with our local partners to assess needs and provide resources to help as Missourians continue this flood fight and as we work to assist one another."

The Missouri River has swelled following heavy rains and snowmelt earlier this month. The flooding has claimed three lives, damaged thousands of homes and busted about 20 levees in Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri.

President Donald Trump on Thursday approved Nebraska's request for federal disaster assistance, which provides federal

aid to supplement state, local and tribal recovery efforts. It also opens the door to grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other programs to help affected residents.

Missouri's emergency declaration comes after state water-patrol troopers worked into the night Wednesday, pulling four people from homes and three others from a boat that ran out of gas around the small town of Craig. People stacked sandbags at a nearby water treatment plant in Forest City on Thursday, while another levee breach across the river from Atchison, Kan., threatened two towns that most residents had already left.

Death toll from cyclone could exceed 1,000

Associated Press

BEIRA, Mozambique — Even as floodwaters began to recede in parts of Mozambique on Friday, fears rose that the death toll could soar as bodies are revealed.

The number of deaths could be beyond the 1,000 predicted by the country's president earlier this week, said Elhadj As Sy, the secretary-general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

In addition to worries about the number of dead, As Sy told The Associated Press that the humanitarian needs are great.

"They are nowhere near the scale and magnitude of the problem," As Sy said.

"And I fear we will be seeing more in the weeks and months ahead, and we should brace ourselves."

Thousands of people were making a grim voyage toward the city of Beira, which although 90 percent destroyed, has become a center for frantic rescue efforts throughout the region.

Some walked along roads carved away by the raging waters a week ago. Others, hundreds of them, were ferried in an extraordinary makeshift effort by local fishermen who plucked stranded people from small islands.

Helicopters set off into the rain for another day of efforts to find people clinging to rooftops and trees.

For those who reach Beira with their few remaining possessions, life is grim. Waterborne diseases are a growing concern as water and sanitation systems were largely destroyed.

"The situation is simply horrendous. There is no other way to describe it," As Sy said after touring transit camps for the growing number of displaced. "Three thousand people ... are living in a school that has 15 classrooms and six — only six — toilets. You can imagine how much we are sitting on a water and sanitation ticking bomb." What moved him the most, he said, was the number of children without their parents, separated in the chaos or newly orphaned.

US vet recounts contractors' arrests in Haiti case

Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — An American security contractor at the center of a mysterious case roiling Haitian politics says that he and a group of fellow veterans were sent to Haiti on a mission to protect a businessman signing a more than \$50 million contract at the country's central bank.

Chris Osman, a 44-year-old retired Navy SEAL, told The Associated Press that he and six fellow contractors were arrested by Haitian police during what was supposed to be a simple Sunday afternoon reconnaissance of the route their client would take to the bank the following day, Feb. 18.

"It went bad for us," he said in the first on-the-record interview by any of the arrested men. "I don't know what the real truth is."

Osman said he and his fellow contractors — carrying a dozen semi-automatic rifles and pistols, along with satellite phones and other gear — had pulled away from the bank when they were stopped by police and detained for three days before they were set free by Haiti's Justice Ministry and allowed to fly home to the U.S., where they were released without charges.

The contractors' unexplained release and the still-murky nature of their mission have helped fuel political chaos in Haiti, where President Jovenel Moise has faced months of protests over his government's failure to prosecute the theft and mismanagement of \$2 billion in subsidized oil aid from Venezuela under the administration of his predecessor and political patron, Michel Martelly.

Neither Moise's administration nor the American ambassador in Haiti, Michele Sison, has offered any explanation of the U.S. contractors' mission in Haiti or the reason for their release, which appeared to violate Haitian criminal procedure. Moise's allies in the lower house of Parliament dissolved the Haitian government by dismissing Prime Minister Jean-Henry Ceant on Monday hours before he was due to testify in the Senate about the American contractors' case.

Communications Minister Jean-Michel Lapin was being named interim prime minister Thursday, but there seemed little likelihood that the government would be able to bring stability to a country gripped by rising inflation, energy shortages and popular discontent.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Officers catch kids dropped from window

IA DES MOINES — Four Des Moines police officers are being hailed for catching children dropped by their mother from a third-story window during an apartment fire.

The officers had been dispatched around 3:15 a.m. Tuesday to help firefighters at the complex in northern Des Moines. Officials said the officers arrived before firefighters and quickly arrayed themselves on the ground to help the mother save the three young children.

On a video released by Des Moines police, one officer can be heard yelling over the sound of sirens, “I got ‘em, yup. Drop ‘em!”

Fire Lt. Rick Thomas said none of the children, firefighters or officers was injured. The fire cause is being investigated.

The Police Department posted on its Facebook page praise for officers Cole Johnson, Tyler Kelley, Casey Sanders and Craig Vasquez.

Winner announced for best beard contest

VT BURLINGTON — A Bristol man’s whiskers have won him the title of having the best beard in Vermont.

The Burlington Free Press reported Steve Reilly won the top prize at the third-annual Vermont Beardies contest Saturday.

The event benefits Make-A-Wish Vermont, which helps grant wishes to children with life-threatening conditions.

This year’s contest had 105 entrants and raised more than \$50,000. Winners receive a gift card for beard care products and bragging rights.

More military, police monuments vandalized

MA BOSTON — Boston police are investigating more cases of vandalism to military and police memorials.

Police said Tuesday memorials to veterans of several wars as well as fallen police officers in city-owned Mount Hope Cemetery in Mattapan were splashed with a dark liquid.

State police reported Monday that someone had thrown an oily liquid at a World War II memorial at Castle Island in South Boston.

Police Commissioner William Gross called the vandalism “incredibly distasteful and disheartening.”

Mayor Marty Walsh said in a statement said the vandalism “will not be tolerated in our city.”

A police spokesman said it’s too early to say whether the South Boston and Mattapan incidents are connected.

Man assaulting girl hit by mom with sword

GA MACON — A man has been arrested in Georgia after a woman told sheriff’s deputies she hit her boyfriend with a sword after she found him molesting her 5-year-old daughter.

The Twiggs County Sheriff’s Office said officers were called about midnight March 14 about an unwanted person at a home.

News outlets reported the woman said she cut the man as he tried to leave the home.

John Lawarren Williams, 25, of Twiggs County turned himself in to Sheriff Darren Mitchum about 6 a.m. last Friday. Williams was treated for a minor cut and has been charged with aggravated child molestation and two counts of cruelty to children.

The woman and child were taken to a Macon hospital to be checked.

Dozens of snakes live under man’s home

TX ALBANY — A Texas homeowner who reported seeing “a few” snakes under his home actually had dozens of rattlesnakes living beneath his house.

That’s according to Big Country Snake Removal, whose workers pulled 45 rattlesnakes from underneath the home near Albany, about 150 miles west of Dallas.

The company said on its Facebook page that the homeowner had crawled underneath his home after high winds disrupted his cable television service. The homeowner saw a few snakes, quickly crawled out and contacted the snake removal company, which removed the rattlesnakes last week.

Snakes will begin emerging from underneath Texas homes as the weather warms up, increasing the risk of snakebites. Officials said that on average, one to two people die in Texas each year from a venomous snake bite.

Man is charged with causing panic at mall

CA LOS ANGELES — Prosecutors have charged a Missouri man they said caused a panic at a Los Angeles mall last week.

The Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office said Nicholas Oates pleaded not guilty Tuesday to charges including burglary, arson and assault with a firearm.

The panic occurred Friday when a man entered a store at Westfield Century City mall, took books from shelves and began to ignite them.

Police said an employee at-

tempted to stop the man but he pulled a handgun, causing the employee to evacuate the store.

People fled the mall, and social media was flooded with erroneous reports of an active shooter. A car left at the mall led police to identify Oates, who was arrested Saturday.

Police corral runaway calf on expressway

NY NEW YORK — A runaway calf got loose in the Bronx, snarling traffic on the Major Deegan Expressway before being corralled and hogtied by dozens of police officers.

The 8-month-old calf was first spotted around 11:30 a.m. Tuesday heading toward the George Washington Bridge.

It wasn’t clear where the bovine came from, but there is a happy ending.

The calf, now named Major Deegan, is being put to pasture at the Skylands Animal Sanctuary & Rescue in Wantage, N.J.

Skylands founder Mike Stura told Pix11 it’s “as good as it gets.”

Man drives into store after falling asleep

FL MIAMI — Authorities said a Florida man fell asleep while driving and crashed into a store.

The Miami Herald reported that the crash occurred Tuesday morning at a shopping plaza.

Miami police said the man was driving home after working an overnight shift when his car jumped a curb and slammed into dd’s Discounts. Officials said the store wasn’t open yet, so no customers were injured. The driver was taken to a nearby hospital as a precaution.

It wasn’t immediately clear if the driver would be cited.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Big Ten opens NCAA Tournament 5-0

Associated Press

Already appearing drained by Michigan State's difficult victory over the upset seekers from Bradley, coach Tom Izzo winced a little more in his postgame interview on the court when the subject turned to the next opponent for the Spartans in the East Region.

Sure, Minnesota is the No. 10 seed that had a losing record in conference play, but a Big Ten team is not what Izzo wanted or expected to see on the first weekend of the NCAA Tournament. Never mind the 79-55 margin when the Gophers visited the Spartans on Feb. 9 in their only meeting of the season. There's no foe with better insight about how to beat a team than one from the same league.

"Definitely feels good to be advancing, you know?" Michigan State point guard Cassius Winston said after the 76-65 win over the resilient Braves on Thursday. "I think coach said at the end of the game, 'Even after all that, we're still one of the last 32 standing right now.'"

After sending eight teams to the tournament, the most of any league in the field this year and the most in Big Ten history, the oldest of the major conferences produced a perfect 5-0 record in the first half of the first round. Iowa, Ohio State and

Wisconsin are on deck on Friday.

Minnesota defeated Louisville, Maryland hung on to beat Belmont, Michigan blew out Montana and Purdue took down Old Dominion. Commissioner Jim Delany is getting a nice little retirement gift.

The Big Ten wasn't alone with its strong start. Thanks to wins by Auburn, Florida, Kentucky and LSU, the Southeastern Conference is 4-0 with Mississippi, Mississippi State and Tennessee left to play on Friday.

By Saturday, though, at least one Big Ten team is guaranteed to be knocked out because of the bracketing that lined Michigan State up with Minnesota. What's more: The winner would face Maryland in the Sweet 16, in Washington, D.C., no less, if the Terapins beat LSU.

The Minnesota-Michigan State matchup in the second round will be the earliest two Big Ten teams have ever met in the NCAA Tournament and only the eighth in history. The only time two Big Ten teams have played before the regional finals was in 1980, when Purdue beat Indiana in the round of 16.

There hasn't been an all-Big Ten matchup in any round since Michigan State beat Wisconsin in the Final Four in 2000. That came a few days after Wisconsin's win over Purdue in the regional finals.

According to NCAA director of media

coordination and statistics David Worlock, the selection committee tries to avoid these earlier-round pairings between teams from the same conference, if possible.

The selection principles state that if the teams only played once during the season, including the conference tournament, they can play as early as the second round. Minnesota and Michigan State met only once this season in the Big Ten's 20-game schedule. If teams play twice, they can't face each other until the Sweet 16, and if they play three times they can't face each other until the regional finals.

The Spartans, considered the strongest of the No. 2 seeds, were widely seen as getting the rawest deal in the bracket reveal on Sunday when they were placed in No. 1 overall seed Duke's region. As usual, Izzo had plenty of commentary on the process, expressing a belief that the committee looks too closely at proximity to venues when seeding and placing teams.

"The emphasis shouldn't be placed on geography, but it should be placed on rewarding teams that have performed and what their performance is," Izzo said. "We're splitting hairs over what we can be over 10 more minutes in a plane, 100 more miles. So thank God, there seems to be a lot more people than me upset about it."

East Region roundup

Gophers knock off Louisville

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — Minnesota found its elusive three-point stroke just in time to give coach Richard Pitino the NCAA Tournament win he'd been seeking for years.

The 10th-seeded Gophers won their first NCAA Tournament game in six seasons behind 24 points from freshman Gabe Kalscheur, who helped Minnesota roll past Louisville 86-76 in the opening round of the East Region on Thursday.

The win for Pitino came against the school that fired his father. Rick Pitino coached the Cardinals for 16 seasons before his 2017 dismissal.

LSU 79, Yale 74: At Jacksonville, Fla., Skylar Mays hit four free throws in the final 15

seconds to help the embattled Tigers slip past the 14th-seeded Bulldogs.

Mays scored 19 points but sealed the game from the charity stripe, and LSU (27-6) needed each one of his free throws.

Maryland 79, Belmont 77: At Jacksonville, Fla., the Terapins' Darryl Morsell made a crucial defensive stop as the Bruins went for a last-second upset in the NCAA Tournament, allowing them to escape.

Michigan State 76, Bradley 65: At Des Moines, Iowa, Cassius Winston scored 26 points and the second-seeded Spartans held off the Braves.

Xavier Tillman had 16 points with 11 boards for Michigan State (29-6), which will face Big Ten rival, 10th-seeded Minnesota, on Saturday.

Midwest Region roundup

Auburn gets by New Mexico

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — A.J. Harris had an easy layup for the tie. He wanted a win for New Mexico State.

It didn't work out, but boy-oh-boy, what a way for the Aggies to go down swinging Thursday against fifth-seeded Auburn in the NCAA Tournament.

With the clock ticking down, Harris passed on an open layup and kicked out to wide-open teammate Terrell Brown, who was spotted up for the game-winner behind the arc. Brown was fouled as he took the shot, but missed two of three free throws with 1.1 seconds left, and New Mexico State fell 78-77.

Kentucky 79, Abilene Christian 44: At Jacksonville, Fla., with PJ Washington watching

from the bench in a cast, the second-seeded Wildcats romped past Abilene Christian.

Even without Washington, who sprained his left foot in the Southeastern Conference Tournament, the Wildcats had far too many weapons for the Southland Conference representative, a No. 15 seed. Reid Travis added 18 points and Tyler Herro 14.

Wofford 84, Seton Hall 68: At Jacksonville, Fla., Fletcher Magee set the Division I career record for three-pointers, poured in 24 points and led the seventh-seeded Terriers past the Pirates.

Kansas 87, Northeastern 53: At Salt Lake City, Dedric Lawson had 25 points and 11 rebounds, and the Jayhawks dominated inside for a rout of the Huskies.

South Region roundup

Villanova outlasts Saint Mary's in opener

Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — Villanova got off to a slow start in defense of its NCAA championship against a determined, defensive-minded Saint Mary's team that came in confident after a season-defining win.

But the Wildcats, a No. 6 seed in this NCAA Tournament after an up-and-down season, have one thing no team in the field of 64 has: a pair of leaders who have won two national titles.

Phil Booth scored 20 points, fellow senior Eric Paschell added 14 and Villanova held off 11th-seeded Saint Mary's 61-57 on Thursday night.

"We're growing, our young guys are growing, but we have two seniors who do everything for us, on and off the court," coach Jay Wright said. "We're

just so lucky to have them."

Sophomore Jermaine Sameuls added 12 points for the Wildcats (26-9), who led for almost 33 minutes, but never by more than eight points.

"The tempo was excruciating," Wright said. "We felt going in we were going to have to grind with them."

The Gaels used the same slow pace to upset Gonzaga in the West Coast Conference Tournament, and it gave them a chance against Villanova (26-9) in a tense opening-round matchup.

Jordan Ford and Malik Fitts each had 13 points for Saint Mary's (22-12). Ford's basket in the lane after a few nifty moves got the Gaels within six points at 61-55 with 34 seconds left.

After Paschell missed a foul shot on the other end, Fitts cut

the deficit to four points with a leaner in the lane. The Gaels had two more chances in the final seconds, but Fitts hit the rim on a three-point attempt and Villanova freshman Sadiq Bey stole the ball from Ford in the final seconds to seal the win.

"We had a few games this year where we put the press on and were able to get back in the game," said Ford. "And if we get a few of those loose balls, or maybe make a three when we were down four, I think it's a different game."

Purdue 61, Old Dominion 48: At Hartford, Conn., Carsen Edwards scored 26 points and the third-seeded Boilermakers coasted past the Monarchs.

Purdue (24-9) will play reigning NCAA champion Villanova, the sixth-seed in the South Re-

gion, on Saturday.

Edwards, the Big Ten's leading scorer, has been slumping recently and dealing with a sore back that he insisted was fine on Wednesday. The junior guard had shot 32 percent in his last 11 games, and was 7-for-33 from three-point range in his last three games.

Ahmad Caver scored 19 points and B.J. Stith had 14 for Old Dominion (26-9). The Monarchs shot 27 percent from the field in their first NCAA appearance since 2011.

The Boilermakers scored the last 11 points of the second half as ODU went stone cold. The Monarchs missed their last 11 shots of the half and went scoreless for 6:17 as Purdue took a control and led 32-19 at the break.

West Region roundup

Morant leads Murray State to upset of Marquette

Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — The game was in hand for Murray State and sensational point guard Ja Morant, who dominated Marquette in every way. With a chance to make some NCAA Tournament history, Morant's coach told him to hit the boards and grab the rebound that would push him to an elusive triple-double.

Morant went up for a missed shot, snatched the ball away from an eager teammate, and that was it. Murray State fans began chanting "Tri-ple double!" to celebrate an upset in the first round of the West Region.

Morant seized the moment on college basketball's big stage, slicing through Marquette with 16 assists, 17 points and 11 rebounds as Murray State trounced the fifth-seeded Golden Eagles 83-64 on Thursday.

The triple-double was the

ninth in the tournament since the NCAA started tracking them in 1987 and first since 2012. Murray State (28-4) continued a trend of 12 seeds beating 5s in March. It has happened every year but three since 2001, but this looked nothing like an upset. The Racers have won 12 consecutive games, including the Ohio Valley Conference tournament.

Florida State 76, Vermont 69: At Hartford, Conn., Mfiondu Kabengele had 21 points and 10 rebounds, and the Seminoles held off a barrage of three-pointers from the 13th-seeded Catamounts.

Terance Mann added 19 points for fourth-seeded Florida State (28-7), which was tied with Vermont at halftime but pulled away late.

Anthony Lamb had 16 points to lead a balanced, long-range attack for Vermont (27-7), which

lost for the first time in seven games. Three Catamounts finished with 15 points.

Florida 70, Nevada 61: At Des Moines, Iowa, the Gators nearly squandered a double-digit lead before finally stopping a Wolf Pack comeback and pulling off the upset.

Kevarrius Hayes scored 16 points, Jalen Hudson added 15 and 10th-seeded Florida won its tournament opener for the third straight year.

Michigan 74, Montana 55: At Des Moines, Iowa, Charles Matthews had 22 points and 10 rebounds in his best performance since coming back from injury, and the second-seeded Wolverines put away the Grizzlies early.

Ignas Brazdeikis added 14 points and seven rebounds, and Jon Teske had 11 points and nine boards for Michigan, which led by as many as 27 points in the second half.

Gonzaga 87, Fairleigh Dickinson 49: At Salt Lake City, the Bulldogs crushed any thought of a top seed getting knocked off on the first day with a wire-to-wire thumping of the Knights.

Rui Hachimura led the Zags (31-3) with 21 points and eight rebounds, and this game looked every bit as lopsided as most of the 1-vs.-16 contests since 1985, when the bracket was expanded to 64 teams.

Baylor 78, Syracuse 69: At Salt Lake City, Makai Mason scored 22 points and the Bears set a school NCAA Tournament record with 16 three-pointers to beat the Orange.

Ninth-seeded Baylor (20-13) found gaps in Syracuse's 2-3 zone, mostly by getting the ball into the high post or driving and kicking out. Baylor nearly matched the school tournament record of 11 three-pointers in the first half (10) and made 16 of 34 overall.

NHL roundup

Vegas' Subban earns first career shutout

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Malcolm Subban stopped 20 shots for his first NHL shutout, William Karlsson and Reilly Smith each scored twice, and the Vegas Golden Knights beat the Winnipeg Jets 5-0 on Thursday night.

Tomas Nosek also scored for Vegas, which is 10-1 since losing to Winnipeg 6-3 in its final game before acquiring Mark Stone at the trade deadline.

Subban, whose shutout came in his 35th career start, has won two straight and seven of his last nine starts. He's also nearly unbeatable at T-Mobile Arena with a 13-1-0 record in two seasons.

Winnipeg dropped to 5-3-0 in the second game of back-to-backs this season.

Laurent Brossoit started in net for the Jets, but was pulled

after allowing three goals. Connor Hellebuyck, who entered with 14 minutes left in the second period, allowed two goals and made 18 saves.

Lightning 6, Hurricanes 3: Ryan Callahan scored the tie-breaking goal midway through the third period, and visiting Tampa Bay picked up its seventh straight win.

Canadiens 4, Islanders 0: Carey Price stopped 27 shots for his fourth shutout of the season and host Montreal beat New York to remain in the hunt for an Eastern Conference playoff spot.

Kings 4, Sharks 2: Anze Kopitar had a goal and an assist, Matt Roy scored his first career goal and host Los Angeles used a three-goal third period to top San Jose.

Flyers 3, Blackhawks 1: Carter Hart made 40 saves and James van Reimsdyk snapped

a tie in the third period, helping visiting Philadelphia beat Chicago.

Avalanche 3, Stars 1: Philipp Grubauer made a season-high 44 saves, including 23 in the third period, defenseman Erik Johnson and Tyson Barrie scored and visiting Colorado beat Dallas to make the Western Conference playoff race even tighter.

Bruins 5, Devils 1: Patrice Bergeron scored twice and reached the 30-goal mark for the fifth time and streaking Boston beat injury-ravaged host New Jersey to open a six-point lead over Toronto in the race for second place in the Atlantic Division.

Panthers 4, Coyotes 2: Aleksander Barkov scored two goals and Jonathan Huberdeau had three assists as host Florida won for the first time in three games.

Blues 5, Red Wings 2: Ivan Barbashev recorded his first career NHL hat trick to lead host St. Louis past Detroit.

Penguins 2, Predators 1 (SO): Sidney Crosby's goal in the shootout gave visiting Pittsburgh a win over Nashville to end a three-game losing streak.

Flames 5, Senators 1: Andrew Mangiapane, Garnet Hathaway and Matthew Tkachuk each had a goal and an assist as host Calgary topped Ottawa in a game that matched the top team in the West against the team with the worst record in the East.

Oilers 4, Blue Jackets 1: Connor McDavid had a goal and an assist and Leon Draisaitl had three assists as host Edmonton snapped a two-game skid with a win over Columbus.

NBA roundup

Nuggets down Wizards for 5th straight victory

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nikola Jokic had 15 points and 11 assists, and the Denver Nuggets beat the fading Washington Wizards 113-108 on Thursday night for their fifth straight victory.

Paul Millsap, Gary Harris, Jamal Murray and Torrey Craig also added 15 points for the Nuggets, who were playing for the first time since clinching their first playoff berth in six years with Monday's win in Boston.

Eight players reached double figures for Denver, which is a half-game behind Western Conference leader Golden State. The Warriors played later Thursday.

Bradley Beal scored 25 points and Tomas Satoransky had 16 points and 10 assists

for Washington, which lost its third straight.

Warriors 112, Pacers 89: Kevin Durant had 15 points, six assists and three blocked shots after losing a close friend earlier in the day, and Golden State ran away from visiting Indiana.

Durant led a balanced Warriors attack, playing the same day childhood friend Cliff Dixon was shot to death in Atlanta. Warriors guard Quinn Cook also was close with Dixon as they're all from the Washington D.C./Maryland area.

Stephen Curry scored 12 of his 15 points with four three-pointers during the Warriors' 35-point third quarter in which they held Indiana to 19.

Tyreke Evans scored 20 points off the bench and Thaddeus Young added 18 points for the Pacers.

Hawks 117, Jazz 114: Trae Young scored 23 points, including a go-ahead three-point play, and host Atlanta ended Utah's five-game winning streak.

Donovan Mitchell led the Jazz with 34 points.

It was a costly loss. The Jazz entered the game fifth in the Western Conference but only a half-game ahead of a pack of three teams tied for sixth.

Pistons 118, Suns 98: Wayne Ellington scored 23 points and visiting Detroit made 17 three-pointers in a victory over Phoenix.

Andre Drummond finished with 16 points and 19 rebounds. Blake Griffin, who was rested for Detroit's loss at Cleveland on Monday, returned and struggled with his shot, going just 4 of 17. But he finished with 17 points, eight rebounds and seven assists.

Devin Booker scored 20 of his 26 points in the first half for the Suns, who have lost four of five. Deandre Ayton added 20 points.

Hornets 113, Timberwolves 106: Kemba Walker scored 31 points, rookie Miles Bridges had 11 points and 12 rebounds for his first career double-double on his 21st birthday, and host Charlotte handed Minnesota its fifth straight loss.

Jeremy Lamb added 13 points and 10 rebounds for the Hornets, who won for only the fifth time in their last 16 games.

Karl-Anthony Towns led Minnesota with 21 points and 16 rebounds.

Kings 116, Mavericks 100: Marvin Bagley III had 22 points and 12 rebounds in his first game against fellow rookie star Luka Doncic, and host Sacramento beat Dallas.