

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, March 5, 2020

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Number of USFK-related cases now 6

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — After two more U.S. military dependents tested positive for COVID-19, the Army commander in the epicenter of South Korea's coronavirus outbreak pleaded with his community Thursday to help maintain the "bubble" protecting the garrison as the new coronavirus spreads outside.

Confirmation that an active-duty American service member's dependent and the spouse of a civilian Defense Department employee had been infected raised to six the number of confirmed cases affiliated with U.S. Forces Korea.

All were in the southeastern city of Daegu or surrounding areas, which have been hardest hit by the respiratory virus as South Korea's overall toll increased to more than 6,000,

with 40 deaths.

USFK, which commands some 28,500 American troops on the divided peninsula, has restricted access to installations, barred service members from nonessential outside activities and implemented health checks at entry gates to contain the virus.

The six cases, including a soldier and his wife, involved people who lived off post, officials said.

Col. Edward Ballanco, commander of the Daegu garrison, expressed concern that at least two civilians were not following advice to avoid city facilities and warned that entry privileges would be revoked if necessary.

"We absolutely don't want to do that, but our priority is to protect the community," he said Thursday during a Facebook live update.

USFK has raised its coronavirus risk level to "high." But Ballanco said that on post it's "extremely low because we've created a bubble for our community.

"We've got our bubble established," he added. "It's holding, it's working and our community has not had an outbreak. We've had a couple isolated cases and that's it."

The service member's dependent "had been in self-quarantine since Feb. 26 and had not been in contact with any other USFK-affiliated person," so health authorities decided that no probe into possible contact with others was needed, according to a press release.

The patient was in isolation under direct U.S. military medical care and supervision, it said.

The civilian dependent had been in self-quarantine since

Feb. 28 and had not been in contact with anybody other than her spouse since then, USFK said, adding that both had been quarantined at their residence.

South Korean and U.S. military health professionals were conducting a trace investigation to determine whether anyone else may have been exposed, according to USFK.

The woman said that she hadn't been on post since Feb. 21, and the Defense Biometric Identification System used to control access showed that to be true, Ballanco said.

Further investigation, however, showed that she had entered the commissary and post exchange on Feb. 27, according to scans of her ration card that's needed for purchases, he said, without elaborating.

Both facilities had been temporarily closed, cleaned and reopened, he said.

Roosevelt is 2nd carrier to visit Vietnam since 1970s

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The USS Theodore Roosevelt arrived Thursday in Vietnam, becoming only the second United States aircraft carrier to make a port call there since the fall of Saigon in 1975.

The carrier, accompanied by the guided-missile cruiser USS Bunker Hill, steamed into Danang, where they were met by Vietnamese and U.S. government and military officials, according to a 7th Fleet news release. Waiting to greet the vessels were Adm. John C. Aquilino, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, and U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Daniel Kritenbrink.

The port call by the Roos-

velt and its strike group, a total of 6,500 military personnel, marks 25 years since the two former foes normalized their diplomatic relations.

Adm. Phil Davidson, commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, announced Tuesday that the Roosevelt would stop in Vietnam.

"It's true. We do have TR pulling into Danang this week," he said in response to a reporter's question during 2020 West, a naval conference in San Diego.

The BBC's Vietnamese language online news site reported that the Roosevelt would stay in port five days. The strike group crew is expected to take part in community service projects, sports competitions and other events, according to 7th Fleet.

"This visit will not only serve to strengthen our bilateral defense relationship, but also help further advance our cultural and professional ties," said Capt. Brett Crozier, the Roosevelt's commanding officer, according to the 7th Fleet.

The Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group left San Diego on Jan. 17 for deployment in the Indo-Pacific region.

The strike group also includes the guided-missile destroyers USS Russell, USS Paul Hamilton, USS Pinckney, USS Kidd and USS Rafael Peralta.

The carrier USS Carl Vinson made the first historic visit to Danang in March 2018.

Davidson remarked Tuesday on the growing importance of Vietnam's support of U.S. ef-

orts to push back on China's broad, but disputed claims of sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, which also borders Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Vietnam has been "quite vocal and supportive" of U.S. freedom-of-navigation operations near islands claimed by China in the South China Sea, Davidson said. The Navy sails ships close to islands claimed by China in a subtle show of force during those operations.

Vietnam is also chairing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations this year, thus taking the lead on negotiating a code of conduct with China for defined "rules of the road" for international air and sea traffic in the South China Sea, he said.

Army, Marines seek to buy multicaliber, modular sniper rifle

By SLOBODAN LEKIC
Stars and Stripes

The Army and Marine Corps want to buy a multicaliber sniper rifle that would provide improved accuracy at long ranges as part of modernization efforts aimed at maintaining parity with rivals like Russia and China.

Both services have allocated funding in the proposed 2021 budget for the bolt-action, modular Barrett Firearms Multi-Role Adaptive Design, or MRAD, which allows for quick barrel swaps to handle 7.62 mm NATO, .300 Norma Magnum and .338 Norma Magnum ammunition.

The Army in its budget request said the rifle, designated Mk22 by Special Operations Command, would become the primary antipersonnel sniper system, “effective against personnel and material targets at extreme ranges.”

Its range of 1,500 meters is 300 meters greater than that of the M2010 sniper rifle it will replace, the Army said. This “increases stand-off distances ensuring overmatch against enemy counter sniper engagements and increases sniper capability,” the document said.

The .338 Norma Magnum’s terminal ballistics are also much more potent than the .300 round used by the M2010, the document stated. It would allow the Mk22 to even replace the Barrett M107 .50-caliber heavy sniper rifle for long-range engagements against soft-skinned vehicles.

The Marine Corps, which has chosen the MRAD for its Advanced Sniper Rifle program, said the rifle will improve the sniper’s ability to rapidly engage multiple moving targets.

“ASR will replace all current bolt-action sniper rifles in the Marine Corps,” the service said in its budget request. “It is a multi-caliber system featuring extended range, greater lethality and a wider variety of special purpose ammunition than current systems.

“All of these programs are modernization efforts vital to maintaining parity with near peer competitors,” the Marine Corps said.

The two services have placed orders for a combined 768 MRAD rifles worth \$14 million, Business Insider reported last month. The cost, approximately \$16,000 per rifle, includes a suppressor and a variable power rifle scope, it said.

Special Operations Command and Marine Corps officials were not immediately available for comment Tuesday on plans for the rifles.

Space Force leaders say branch will be kept small

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Space Force leaders on Wednesday insisted to some skeptical House legislators that they would keep the new service branch small and hyper-focused on operating and defending the military’s space assets long into the future.

In a pair of hearings on Capitol Hill, top leaders of Space Force testified the sixth military service would build up slowly and carefully during the next several years as it absorbs existing space service members and units from other services. Air Force Lt. Gen. David Thompson, who is assigned as the Space Force’s No. 2 general, told the House Appropriations Committee’s defense subpanel that space leaders were going to great lengths to avoid unnecessary buildup of the service, which is expected to grow to as many as 16,000 troops.

“There’s been tremendous pressure and tremendous drive from our leadership to hold down the bureaucracy of this force,” he told the subcommittee during Wednesday’s first hearing focused on the Space Force, which was established in December. “We are going through a number of initiatives to ensure we are agile, we are lean and we are mission-focused.”

One of those initiatives is establishing how existing space troops from the other services will be incorporated into the Space Force. The Space Force intends to start with Air Force space operators, likely with the first batch moving in September, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Clinton Crosier, the director of Space Force planning.

Planners have identified individuals serving in 16 Air Force specialties as troops expected to have an opportunity to transfer into the service, according to a defense official, who provided the list on condition of anonymity and cautioned that the military jobs available within the Space Force could change as plans are finalized. Those specialties are: 13S space operations, 1C6 space systems operations, 14N intelligence, 17C cyber operations officer, 17D cyber operations, 1N0 all source intelligence, 1N1 geospatial intelligence, 1N2 signals intelligence, 3D1N4 fusion analysis, 3D0 cyber operations, 3D1 cyber support, 62E development engineer, 62S material leader, 63A acquisition manager, 63G senior material leader-upper echelon and 63S material leader.

Crosier said he does not expect space operators now serving in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps to transfer into the Space Force until 2022.

USAF still short more than 2K pilots

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The top general for the Air Force told House lawmakers Wednesday that his service remained short some 2,000 pilots even after years of attempting to curb aviator losses with large bonuses and increased time in the cockpit.

Gen. David Goldfein, the Air Force chief of staff, told the House Armed Services Committee that the service was “holding its own” in stabilizing its pilot shortfall and has improved retention numbers among experienced pilots. But the Air Force — just like the other military services — has continued to struggle to attract pilots into its ranks and keep them flying military aircraft.

“This is a national-level issue, not an Air Force-level issue. The nation is not producing enough pilots,” Goldfein said dur-

ing the hearing to defend the Air Force’s request for about \$153.6 billion for fiscal year 2021. “We’re starting to see positive trends ... but it’s too early to declare any kind of victory.”

Goldfein, who is a decorated career fighter pilot, said the Air Force needs 21,000 pilots in its ranks to meet estimated requirements in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which commits the military to preparing to fight a major conflict against a powerful adversary, namely China or Russia. The general said the service has about 19,000 pilots. It’s similar to what Air Force officials reported last year.

Military officials have blamed a combination of the lure of high-paying commercial airliner jobs and low morale among pilots, who until the last few years saw training flight time reduced significantly amid shrinking military budgets and widespread issues with aircraft maintenance.

Screenings at Pensacola didn't cover international students

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Pentagon procedures meant to detect and prevent threats at U.S. military bases didn't cover international military students, such as the Saudi officer who carried out a deadly attack on Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla., last year, a defense official said Wednesday.

Garry Reid, director for defense intelligence, testified before a Senate Armed Services subcommittee about his office's review of how foreign military students are screened before entering the United States and accessing U.S. military bases. The Pentagon is "overly reliant" on the Department of State's vetting procedures for these students, and the agencies fail to share information, Reid said. There are also loopholes that allow foreign military students to purchase firearms, despite restrictions for non-immigrant

visa holders.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper ordered the review after the attack in Pensacola on Dec. 6. Mohammed Alshamrani, a second lieutenant in the Royal Saudi Air Force, killed three U.S. sailors: Ensign Joshua Watson, 23; Airman Mohammed Haitham, 19; and Airman Apprentice Cameron Walters, 21. Eight others were injured. Alshamrani was training at Pensacola through the International Military Education and Training Program.

Esper directed Reid's office to immediately strengthen vetting for international military students. They screened all students from Saudi Arabia in the U.S. and are working to vet students from other countries — about 5,000 total. None of the screenings so far have found new threats or triggered removal or further investigation, Reid said.

Separately, during the FBI's investigation into the attack in

Pensacola, 21 Saudi students were expelled from the U.S. for having "derogatory material" on their computers and phones, Barr said.

"Defense Secretary Esper directed my office to take steps in two areas — to strengthen the vetting process for international military students immediately and to conduct a comprehensive review of policies and procedures in place for screening foreign students and granting access to our bases," Reid said.

To address the second mandate, Reid's team produced a 12-page report about security involving foreign military students and made six recommendations to address 21 findings. However, the full report is classified. To discuss its details, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee's subcommittee on emerging threats and capabilities went into a session Wednesday that was closed to the public.

Warren ends 2020 presidential campaign

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Elizabeth Warren, who electrified progressives with her "plan for everything" and strong message of economic populism, dropped out of the Democratic presidential race on Thursday, days after the onetime front-runner failed to win a single Super Tuesday state, not even her own.

For much of the past year, her campaign had all the markers of success, robust poll numbers, impressive fundraising and a sprawling political infrastructure that featured staffers on the ground across the country. But once voting began in February, she never found a reliable base of supporters as Democrats coalesced around Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, her progressive rival, and former Vice President Joe Biden, who established himself as the leading centrist in the race.

"I refuse to let disappointment blind me — or you — to what we've accomplished," Warren told her campaign staff on a call Thursday.

"We didn't reach our goal, but what we have done together — what you have done — has made a lasting difference. It's not the scale of the difference we wanted to make, but it matters."

Outside her Cambridge, Mass., home Thursday, Warren said she wasn't going to endorse anyone right away.

"I need some space and I need a little time right now," she said, standing next to her husband, Bruce Mann, and golden retriever, Bailey.

Warren's voice cracked when she talked about meeting so many little girls while campaigning around the country for the past year and knowing they "are going to have to wait four more years," at least, to see a woman in the White House.

Report: Russia sowing election discord

Associated Press

Four years after Russia-linked groups stoked divisions in the U.S. presidential election on social media platforms, a new report shows that Moscow's campaign hasn't let up and has become harder to detect.

The report from University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Young Mie Kim found that Russia-linked social media accounts are posting about the same divisive issues — race relations, gun laws and immigration — as they did in 2016 when the Kremlin polluted American voters' feeds with messages about the presidential election.

Since then, however, the Russians have grown better at imitating U.S. campaigns and political fan pages online, said Kim, who analyzed thousands of posts. She studied more than 5 million Facebook ads during the 2016 election, identifying Russia's fingerprints on some of the messages through an ad-tracking app installed on volunteers' computers. Her review is co-published by the Brennan Center for Justice, a law and policy institute, where she is a scholar.

The recent improvements make it harder for voters and social media platforms to identify the foreign interference, Kim said.

"For normal users, it is too subtle to discern the differences," Kim said. "By mimicking domestic actors, with similar logos (and) similar names, they are trying to avoid verification."

Kim's report comes weeks after U.S. intelligence officials briefed lawmakers on Russian efforts to stir chaos in American politics and undermine public confidence in this year's election.

Last month, FBI Director Christopher Wray warned that Russia was still actively waging "information warfare" with an army of fictional social media personas and bots that spread disinformation.

In a rare, joint statement Monday, the leaders of America's intelligence agencies cautioned that foreign actors were spreading false information ahead of Super Tuesday to "cause confusion and create doubt in our system."

Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the U.S. elections and did so again on Thursday.

DOJ watchdog: FBI domestic threat assessment lacking

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department inspector general on Wednesday chided the FBI for failing to fully address weaknesses in how it assesses possible homegrown terrorists — an area in which officials have been working to improve after several attacks by suspects previously known to law enforcement.

In a 41-page report, Inspector General Michael Horowitz wrote that while the bureau seemed to admit its failings, it had “not taken sufficient action” to fix them.

For example, Horowitz wrote, the FBI issued a new policy in September 2015 requiring field offices to conduct specific database checks and interview subjects of counterterrorism assessments. But a review found that the field offices did not always comply.

In 2017, Horowitz wrote, the FBI found some potential terrorist threats that might not have been adequately examined from 2014 to 2016. But officials did not take adequate action on nearly 40% of those cases for 18 months, Horowitz wrote.

“As a result, potential terrorist threats were not mitigated for more than 1 year,” Horowitz wrote.

How the bureau assesses homegrown violent extremists — those in the United States inspired to attack by terrorist organizations abroad — is extremely consequential. Horowitz noted that in the more than 20 homegrown terrorist attacks in the U.S. since Sept. 11, 2001, several suspects had been previously assessed by the bureau as a potential threat but not fully investigated.

For each case Horowitz wrote, the bureau opened an assessment but ultimately de-

cidated the suspect did not pose a threat to national security. An assessment is a precursor to a preliminary or full investigation, in which the FBI can take more aggressive steps.

Horowitz wrote that an internal FBI document said the bureau had a “fundamentally incomplete understanding” of the threat posed by such extremists, and that deciphering whether suspects are merely consuming terrorist propaganda or planning an attack “is extremely complex.” He noted, though, that some FBI field offices “may not be fully aware of the investigative tools and techniques that can be used to thoroughly investigate counterterrorism assessment subjects.”

In a letter included in Horowitz’s report, Suzanne Turner, chief of the FBI’s External Audit and Compliance Section, wrote that the bureau has “made changes to implement the best practices and make recommended changes.”

Horowitz noted the FBI had shown a commitment to fighting homegrown violent extremism, making it a priority for its counterterrorism division and increasing the number of agents working on it in field offices across the country.

Horowitz conceded that preventing homegrown violent extremism is “particularly challenging,” as the FBI is required “to balance constitutional protections afforded to U.S. persons with its obligation to protect national security.” Notably, he wrote that the FBI should consider whether to amend its policy and “permit follow-up inquiries of closed assessments” — which could raise civil liberties concerns about whether officials are examining people without proper cause.

Russia, Turkey agree to cease-fire in Syria

Associated Press

MOSCOW — The Turkish and Russian presidents on Thursday sat down for talks in Moscow aimed at ending hostilities in northwestern Syria involving their forces and proxies that threaten to pit the two countries against each other in a direct military conflict.

Both leaders underlined the need to reach an agreement at the start of the Kremlin talks. Russian President Vladimir Putin said that they need to work out steps to end fighting and prevent damage to bilateral relations. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also voiced hope for finding a settlement and pointed at blossoming Russia-Turkey trade.

The fighting has pushed nearly a million Syrian civil-

ians toward Turkey. Erdogan responded by opening Turkey’s gateway to Europe in an apparent bid to persuade the West to offer more support to Ankara.

Just before sitting down with Erdogan, Putin discussed the situation in Idlib with European Council head Charles Michel, who met the Turkish president in Ankara on Wednesday. The Kremlin said Michel informed Putin about the EU’s efforts to block the flow of migrants.

“We need to discuss the situation to prevent any such incidents, and also not to damage Russia-Turkey relations that we cherish,” Putin said.

“The world’s eyes are on us,” Erdogan said. “The steps we will take, the right decisions we will take here today will help ease (concerns in) the region and our countries.”

Tenn. home is beacon of hope after tornado loss

Associated Press

COOKEVILLE, Tenn. — Moments after a tornado tore through his quiet Tennessee neighborhood, Darrell Jennings walked out his front door and heard screaming.

The house next door — and many others — had been leveled to its foundations. Somehow, the Jennings house suffered only a few broken windows.

It quickly became a shelter for those who were suddenly left with nothing. The next-door neighbors, who had miraculously survived, straggled over. Others joined them.

“It’s like we were a beacon,” Amy Jennings said in an interview Wednesday. “We had a house full of muddy people in their pajamas. A lot of babies were screaming. Our teenage kids were amazing. They went into action. They held those kids and got them calm.”

The monstrous tornado tore a 2-mile-long path through

Putnam County early Tuesday, killing 18 people, including five children under 13. Another 88 were injured, some critically. The statewide death toll was 24, and authorities warned it could rise as crews examined debris piles.

No place in the state saw more destruction than pockets of Putnam County, where the Jennings home and a few others left became impromptu support centers for neighbors left homeless.

In his 32 years as a volunteer EMT and firefighter, Jennings said he had been to about 10 different tornado sites, and “this is about the worst I’ve ever seen.”

The Jennings home remained a support center. A neighbor’s outbuilding lay on its side in their driveway, someone’s cat was holed up in their bathroom and cases of bottled water and snacks for neighbors and volunteers kept filling their porch.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Accent mark in official seal in wrong spot

NM SANTA FE — An accent mark of the official seal of the capital city of the nation's most Hispanic state is in the wrong spot.

The misplaced accent mark at the top of Santa Fe's website was recently spotted by a reporter who uses an accent in his name, the Santa Fe New Mexican reported. On the website, the seal uses the official name of the city: La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asis, or Santa Fe for short. But the seal on the city's website puts the accent mark over the first "s" in Asis instead of over the "i."

Cop accused of stealing during arrest, traffic stop

OH CLEVELAND — A Cleveland police officer stole roughly \$1,800 from two people during two different incidents last year, authorities said.

Lorenzo Brazzell Jr., 32, faces two counts of theft in office in an indictment handed up Tuesday by a Cuyahoga County grand jury. Brazzell, who joined the force in March 2017, has been suspended without pay.

The first incident happened June 16, during the arrest of a 31-year-old man. Brazzell searched the man and took \$2,100 in cash from his pockets, authorities say, then took some larger bills and kept them. On Aug. 14, another police officer stopped a vehicle following reports of shots fired. Brazzell drove up to the scene, authorities said. He entered the woman's car under the guise of shutting it off so it could be towed, but authorities say he found \$360 in the vehicle and stole it.

Brawl involving crowbar leaves student injured

PA FAWN — A dispute between two teenage boys on a school bus in western Pennsylvania ended in a street brawl involving a crowbar that left one teen critically injured, authorities said.

The two Highlands School District students, ages 14 and 17, were arguing on the bus Tuesday when the older teen opened the emergency exit and ran out when the bus stopped on a road in Fawn. The younger boy followed, grabbing a crowbar that was mounted near the bus driver, authorities said. The 14-year-old then hit the 17-year-old in the knee with the crowbar, authorities said, but the older teen soon got control of the crowbar. He then repeatedly hit the younger boy in the stomach and head, causing several skull fractures and other injuries.

Police charged the 17-year-old with attempted homicide and aggravated assault.

Man pleads guilty to smuggling goods to Iran

NH CONCORD — A man pleaded guilty in federal court in New Hampshire to smuggling more than \$100,000 worth of motors, pumps and valves from the U.S. into Iran.

The U.S. attorney's office said Aiden Davidson, also known as Hamed Aliabadi, 32, is a citizen of Iran and a naturalized citizen of the U.S. He lived in Tennessee. He was manager of a New Hampshire limited liability company called Golden Gate International.

Prosecutors said between December 2016 and August 2017, Davidson and Golden Gate smuggled goods from Savannah, Ga., to a company that operated an online resale business in Tehran, Iran. But

documents related to the shipments falsely identified the recipient as a Turkish company. Davidson was accused of willfully evading national security controls related to transactions with Iran. Davidson pleaded guilty Monday.

Man uses broom to chase away coyotes

MA SOUTHBOROUGH — Police in a Massachusetts town are urging residents to be cautious after they say a resident had to chase away a pack of coyotes in his backyard with a broom.

Southborough police said on their Facebook page Monday that the man's wife and their dog, an 85-pound Rottweiler-German Shepherd mix, had been outside Sunday night when they were surrounded by four coyotes.

Police said the animals only scattered after her husband ran out of the house and chased them away with a broom.

Coyote breeding occurs in February, and in March, the animals look for areas to set up their dens so that their babies can be born in April, police said.

Police: 'Prank' leads to road rage and attack

CA BURLINGAME — Two teenagers were seriously injured when a driver enraged by damage done to his car during a "prank" struck an innocent group of pedestrians he wrongly believed were responsible, police in Northern California said.

Two other teenagers had moderate injuries after the attack Saturday. The driver, Omeed Adibi, 18, of San Mateo, was arrested, Burlingame Police Lt. Laura Terada said.

Adibi was booked on charges of attempted murder, assault

with a deadly weapon and driving under the influence, according to jail records. He allegedly believed that the four teens had tampered with his car, Terada said, and wanted to get back at them — but it was actually his own friends who damaged his car in a prank.

Student charged after stun gun seen at school

LA ST. MARTINVILLE — A Louisiana junior high school student faces charges after allegedly bringing a stun gun to campus.

The St. Martin Parish Sheriff's Office said deputies responded Tuesday to a report at Cecilia Jr. High School of a 15-year-old boy allegedly in possession of a stun gun. The student faces one count of illegal possession of a dangerous weapon on a school campus by a student or non-student, news outlets reported. There were no reports of any injuries.

2 charged with theft of wire at cellphone tower

WV CEDAR GROVE — Two West Virginia men have been charged related to the theft of copper wiring from a cellphone tower, police said.

Charles Ryan Tucker, 42, of Mammoth, and Jeremy Lane Johnson, 44, of Belle, were charged Tuesday with breaking and entering and damage to utility company property, Kanawha County Sheriff Mike Rutherford said in a news release.

The statement said deputies responding to a break-in at a cellphone tower site near Cedar Grove noticed copper wiring and other items were missing. Detectives obtained surveillance footage of the suspects and eventually found them.

From wire reports

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MWC champ San Diego State seeks more

BY BERNIE WILSON

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO
San Diego State forward Yanni Wetzell said he could practically sense when the calendar turned to March.

"I felt this little edge about me," the big New Zealander said Tuesday before the No. 5 Aztecs held their first full practice for their Mountain West Conference Tournament opener on Thursday in Las Vegas, against ninth-seeded Air Force.

"It's just this feeling inside of me, just I'm ready to go," said Wetzell, who along with fellow transfers Malachi Flynn — named MWC Player of the Year on Tuesday — and KJ Feagin have lifted the Aztecs from no postseason appearance last year to the cusp of being a No. 1 seed for the first time.

"It's the month we've been all working for, for all our whole lives, almost," said Wetzell, a graduate transfer who suffered through 20 straight losses to end last season at Vanderbilt. "For all of us, we're all very excited to get going and get this conference tournament underway."

For top-seeded SDSU (28-1), it will be the chance to hang another banner. They from back page

clinched the regular-season title with four games to go and then unveiled the banner prior to their only loss, 66-63 at home to UNLV on Feb. 22.

"Absolutely. It's going to be the ultimate challenge," said Brian Dutcher, who was named MWC Coach of the Year by his peers a day after winning the same award in voting of the media. "Obviously the upper half of the conference is playing very well right now. ... We're looking for nothing but challenges on a neutral floor and excited to get out there."

The Aztecs and their fans have been looking forward to March since early in this historic season. They won at No. 15 BYU and then beat No. 11 Creighton and No. 18 Iowa on consecutive nights to win a tournament in Las Vegas.

They went 27-0 and were the nation's last unbeaten team before losing to UNLV.

They're projected as the No. 1 seed in the East, where the regionals will be played at New York's Madison Square Garden.

"I think we have to probably win a game or two to be a No. 1 seed," Dutcher said. "I don't know if we have to win all of them. A lot of that depends on how everyone else does. But we want to play our best basketball, regardless. We don't want to go there and take a step back. I tell the guys every

day, 'You either get better or you get worse.' We have to get better leading into the conference tournament and obviously into the NCAA Tournament.

"I think the No. 1 seed obviously has been proven over the years to give you the best chance to advance," said Dutcher, in his third season as head coach after serving as Steve Fisher's top assistant for 18 seasons. "A No. 1 seed would be nice in order to try to advance. But as much as the seeding is, sometimes you just have to get the right draw. You have to get matchups that are suitable for your team. Someone who doesn't play strong where you're weak. Obviously, I'm not going to discuss what those weaknesses are. I have a feeling we have a few but I'm not looking to put them out there for everyone to know."

One of the recent weaknesses is getting off to a slow start defensively. They rallied from a two-point halftime deficit in their last home game to beat Colorado State 66-60 on Feb. 25, and from a 13-point deficit at Nevada on Saturday before winning 83-76.

Dutcher and Aztecs fans would prefer to be in the West in the NCAA Tournament. Second-ranked Gonzaga is projected as the No. 1 seed in the West, where the regionals will be played at Staples Center in Los Angeles.

College basketball roundup

Azubuike scores 31 as No. 1 Kansas beats TCU

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Udoka Azubuikwe walked gingerly into Allen Fieldhouse on his sore ankle and proceeded to score a career-high 31 points with 14 rebounds, leading top-ranked Kansas to a 75-66 victory over TCU on Wednesday night to clinch at least a share of the Big 12 regular-season title.

Azubuikwe, nicknamed "Doke" because of his first name, was 13-for-14 from the field and also had five blocks just four days after hurting his ankle in a win over Kansas State. Devon Dotson added 18 points and he also gave coach Bill Self and about 16,000 fans a scare when he left briefly midway through the second with what appeared to be an ankle injury of his own.

Dotson returned a few minutes later, allowing the Jay-

hawks (27-3, 16-1 Big 12) to begin the celebrations on Senior Night.

No. 3 Dayton 84, Rhode Island 57: Obi Toppin scored 20 points and Trey Landers had 14 points and 14 rebounds to lead the visiting Flyers to their 19th straight victory.

No. 7 Florida State 73, Notre Dame 71: Trent Forrest's putback with 3.8 seconds left capped a ferocious late charge as the Seminoles won on the road to move closer to an Atlantic Coast Conference title.

No. 14 Villanova 79, No. 8 Seton Hall 77: Saddiq Bey scored 20 points as the Wildcats overcame some late free-throw shooting woes to prevent the Pirates from clinching the Big East title.

No. 11 Creighton 91, Georgetown 76: Mitch Ballock made a season-high six three-

pointers and finished with 20 points, and the host Bluejays rode one of their best shooting games.

Texas A&M 78, No. 17 Auburn 75: Josh Nebo scored 17 of his 19 points in the second half and the Aggies survived a frenetic last-minute rally attempt at Auburn.

No. 22 Virginia 46, Miami 44: Kihei Clark made both ends of a one-and-one with 8 seconds left and the visiting Cavaliers won their seventh in a row.

No. 24 Wisconsin 63, Northwestern 48: Nate Reuvers scored 11 points as the host Badgers struggled through a poor offensive performance to beat the Wildcats.

Florida 66, Georgia 54: Noah Locke sank back-to-back three-pointers during the Gators' decisive run of 10 unanswered points in the second

half and they strengthened their NCAA Tournament hopes by beating the host Bulldogs.

Virginia Tech 70, Clemson 58: P.J. Horne scored 17 points and the host Hokies had their second-best shooting performance of the season.

Air Force 77, Fresno State 70: A.J. Walker had a career-high 24 points as the Falcons won in Las Vegas in the first round of the Mountain West Conference tournament.

No. 9 seed Air Force played top-seeded and fifth-ranked San Diego State in the quarterfinals Thursday. The Aztecs won the only regular-season matchup between the teams 89-74.

Walker made five of seven from three-point range. Lavelle Scottie added 21 points and Ryan Swan scored 12 for the Falcons (12-19).

Yelich mum about contract situation

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Christian Yelich is staying quiet when it comes to his contract situation with the Milwaukee Brewers.

While Yelich is brushing off questions about his new deal, his teammates are all-too-happy to sing his praises.

The 28-year-old is reportedly on the brink of a multiyear contract that could keep him in Milwaukee for the rest of his career. The team said the 2018 NL MVP wouldn't answer questions about the negotiations on Wednesday, and the organization also declined comment.

Yelich is guaranteed \$27.75 million in the remainder of his current deal: \$12.5 million this year, \$14 million in 2021 and a \$1.25 million buyout of a 2022 team option for \$16 million. The Athletic reported his new deal would add seven years and increase the total value to ap-

proximately \$215 million.

"He definitely deserves it," Brewers center fielder Lorenzo Cain said. "The guy's definitely the best player on our team. He rakes. Like I said, he got a deserving contract for sure."

Milwaukee obtained Yelich and Cain on the same January day in 2018. Yelich was acquired in a trade with Miami, and Cain agreed to an \$80 million, five-year contract as a free agent.

The silky smooth Yelich turned into one of the game's most feared sluggers in Milwaukee. He led the NL with a .326 batting average, .598 slugging percentage and 1.000 OPS while helping the Brewers make it to the NL Championship Series in his first year with the team. He hit 44 homers and won another NL batting title with a career-high .329 average last season.

"Christian in his first two

years here, you know he has done incredible things," manager Craig Counsell said, "and I think he's taken this challenge, and took a trade that was probably to a place that he wasn't sure about at the outset of it and made the best of it and found a place that he really likes to play."

Yelich was building a case for a second straight MVP award before he broke his right kneecap on Sept. 10, sidelining the outfielder for the rest of the year. He finished second to Los Angeles' Cody Bellinger in the MVP balloting, and the Brewers were eliminated by Washington in the wild-card game.

"Since I've been here and Yeli's been here, I mean he's been the best player I've ever seen," All-Star reliever Josh Hader said. "The way he goes about his business, he does everything the right way and it's just fun to be around him. For

him to be here, life-long Brewer, that's exciting news."

The new contract for Yelich comes after the Brewers shed nearly \$30 million from their payroll after they reached a team-record \$132.6 million last year. Catcher Yasmani Grandal signed with the Chicago White Sox in free agency, and infielder Mike Moustakas left for the Cincinnati Reds.

Yelich's deal shows "he believes in our culture, he believes in the guys around him, he believes in the front office and he loves playing here, he loves the fans," Brewers pitcher Brent Suter said.

Suter said he stood up, gave some fist bumps and jumped around a little bit when he saw the news.

"He's the face of our franchise. He's our guy," he said. "So to see him locked in for nine years is incredible. Very happy day."

Italian sporting events to take place without fans

Associated Press

MILAN — All sporting events in Italy will take place without fans present for at least the next month due to the virus outbreak in the country, the Italian government announced on Wednesday.

That will likely see the Italian soccer league resume in full this weekend with the calendar pushed back a week.

Italy is the epicenter of Europe's coronavirus outbreak. More than 100 people have died and more than 3,000 have been infected with COVID-19.

The Italian government issued a new decree on Wednesday evening, with measures it hopes will help contain the spread of the virus.

All sporting events in the country must take place without fans present until April 3. Schools and universities have been ordered closed until March 15.

Premier Giuseppe Conte posted a five-minute video on

his Facebook page, reassuring people and saying that the decree was a way of assuring "responsible behavior."

He said banning crowds at sporting events would help "prevent further opportunities of infection."

Key games during the period includes Juventus' Champions League game against Lyon. The second leg of the round-of-16 match is scheduled for March 17 in Turin.

Inter Milan and Roma also have Europa League games scheduled, against Getafe and Sevilla, respectively. Inter played Ludogrets inside an empty stadium last week in the previous Europa League round.

The decree also calls into question Italy's Six Nations rugby match against England in Rome on March 14. That match will either have to go ahead in an empty stadium or be postponed. Italy's match against Ireland, which was scheduled for March 7, had already been

postponed.

In tennis, Italy is set to play South Korea in a Davis Cup qualifier this weekend in Cagliari, Sardinia.

The Italian soccer federation confirmed in a statement that all Serie A and Italian Cup matches would be played without fans for the duration of the decree.

The Italian soccer league's governing body has yet to release a revised schedule but reports say the six Serie A soccer matches that were postponed last week will now be played this weekend. That includes one of the biggest matches of the season — the Juventus-Inter game, known as the "Derby d'Italia" or Italy's derby.

Inter's match against Sampdoria was one of four matches postponed the previous weekend. And the club's president Steven Zhang is facing disciplinary action for insulting Serie A president Paolo Dal Pino in an Instagram post reacting to the way the Italian

league is handling the fallout from the virus outbreak.

Inter chief executive Giuseppe Marotta also publicly criticized the league but tempers appeared to have cooled by Wednesday.

"Playing in empty stadiums could be the only way to keep the league going until the end in light of the restrictions that the government is rightly indicating," Marotta said after a meeting at the Serie A headquarters in Rome, but before the decree was announced.

Four Serie A matches went ahead last weekend with fans present as they were taking place in areas that had not been affected by measures to control the outbreak.

A decree on Sunday extended the suspension of all sporting events in Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna until March 8.

The region of Lombardy is the epicenter of Italy's outbreak and there are further clusters in the other two northern regions.

NBA roundup

Heat net 22 threes in win over Magic

Associated Press

MIAMI — It took a record-setting night from three-point range for the Miami Heat to beat the Orlando Magic.

Duncan Robinson scored 27 points, all of them coming from beyond the arc, and the Heat hit a franchise-record 22 three-pointers in their 116-113 win over the Magic on Wednesday night.

Goran Dragic scored 25 points and added nine assists, Kelly Olynyk scored 16 on a perfect shooting night and Jimmy Butler finished with 12 points, eight assists and seven rebounds as Miami won its fourth straight.

The previous record for Heat three-pointers was 21, set April 5, 2017, at Charlotte. The 22 three-pointers made also tied the most allowed in a game by Orlando.

Terrence Ross had season-highs of 35 points and eight three-pointers for the Magic, who have dropped three straight yet remain in the No. 8 spot in the Eastern Conference

playoff race.

Bucks 119, Pacers 100: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 29 points, 12 rebounds and six assists and host Milwaukee recovered after squandering an early 22-point lead to rout Indiana.

The Bucks bounced back from a 105-89 loss at Miami in which they posted their lowest point total of the season. An NBA-best 53-9, Milwaukee hasn't lost back-to-back games all season.

Celtics 112, Cavaliers 106: Jayson Tatum scored 32 points and Boston won at Cleveland in a matchup of short-handed teams.

The Celtics were missing starters Kemba Walker, Jaylen Brown and Gordon Hayward, and the Cavaliers played without starters Andre Drummond and rookie Darius Garland. Cleveland rookie swingman Kevin Porter Jr. left the game in the first half with a head injury and didn't return.

Jazz 112, Knicks 104: Donovan Mitchell and Bojan Bog-

danovic each scored 23 points and Utah won at New York.

Rudy Gobert had 18 points and 14 rebounds for the Jazz. They won their third straight against a team well below .500 from the Eastern Conference.

Trail Blazers 125, Wizards 104: Damian Lillard had 22 points in his return from a groin injury and Carmelo Anthony scored 25 as host Portland beat Washington.

Hassan Whiteside finished with 24 points, 16 rebounds and four blocks for the Trail Blazers. CJ McCollum, like Lillard, had 22 points and five assists.

Thunder 114, Pistons 107: Danilo Gallinari made a three-pointer in the final minute and Oklahoma City won at Detroit after blowing a 16-point second-half lead.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 27 points for the Thunder, who had lost their previous two games, not scoring more than 94 points in either.

Grizzlies 118, Nets 79: Josh Jackson scored 19 points and Memphis won at Brooklyn.

Tyus Jones added 18 points to help the Grizzlies win their third in a row. Ja Morant scored 15 points.

Taurean Prince had 15 points for the Nets.

Timberwolves 115, Bulls 108: Malik Beasley scored 24 points, D'Angelo Russell added 19 and host Minnesota beat Chicago to win both games of a back-to-back for the first time this season.

Coby White led the Bulls with 26 points.

Mavericks 127, Pelicans 123 (OT): Luka Dončić scored 30 points and broke his franchise's career triple-double record with his 22nd, helping host Dallas hold off New Orleans in overtime.

Dončić added 17 rebounds and 10 assists, and Kristaps Porzingis had 34 points and 12 rebounds in the nationally televised matchup between young stars Dončić and Zion Williamson.

Williamson scored 21 points in 35 minutes in the first back-to-back of his NBA career.

NHL roundup

Flyers down Capitals, extend winning streak to seven

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Travis Konecny scored just over a minute after a questionable video review wiped out a goal, and the Philadelphia Flyers beat the Washington Capitals 5-2 on Wednesday night to extend their winning streak to seven games.

Just 71 seconds after referee Peter MacDougall said there was "no conclusive evidence" to show the puck crossed the goal line underneath goaltender Braden Holtby, Konecny hammered the puck into the back of the net for his 24th of the season. He celebrated as if he scored twice.

The Flyers scored three times in 10 minutes to flip momentum in a showdown of the top teams in the Metropolitan Division. Additional goals by Kevin Hayes and Tyler Pitlick during that run, one each by Ivan Provorov and Scott Laughton in the third and 25 saves from Brian Elliott helped Philadelphia move within one point of first-place Washington.

Lars Eller opened the scoring for Washington, and Tom Wilson set up Garnet Hatcher for his second goal of the game.

The Flyers might be without James van Riemsdyk for some time after the winger broke his

right hand after taking a puck to it in the first. Coach Alain Vigneault said van Riemsdyk had an X-ray and "it doesn't look real good."

Ducks 4, Avalanche 3 (OT): Rickard Rakell scored with 1.2 seconds remaining in overtime, Ryan Miller stopped 32 shots and visiting Anaheim ended Colorado's seven-game winning streak.

Rakell's shot appeared to deflect off the stick of Avalanche defenseman Samuel Girard and past goaltender Pavel Francouz. It was Rakell's first goal since Jan. 31.

Flames 3, Blue Jackets 2 (OT): T.J. Brodie scored with 11 seconds remaining in over-

time as host Calgary rallied from a two-goal deficit and beat Columbus.

Blue Jackets goaltender Jonas Korpisalo had lost his stick and was unable to get a glove on Brodie's wrist shot from the high slot.

Coyotes 4, Canucks 2: Lawson Crouse scored a tiebreaking goal midway through the third period and visiting Arizona tightened the playoff race in the Western Conference with a win over Vancouver.

The win moves the Coyotes into a three-way tie with the Canucks and Winnipeg in points (74) for the two wildcard playoff spots in the Western Conference.