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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Report: Afghan force levels shrinking

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The number of U.S.-funded Afghan security force personnel has sharply declined over the past year, even as fighting and terrorist attacks escalated in many parts of the country, a U.S. government watchdog said Monday.

The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces as of Jan. 31 numbered 296,409 people, with the Afghan National Army at 85.4 percent of its authorized strength and the Afghan National Police at 93.4 percent of its authorized strength.

The figures, compiled by U.S. Forces-Afghanistan from

the Afghan military, were in a report issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR.

The information had been classified or restricted from the public for the past six months, SIGAR said.

The shortfall in forces came even though the authorized strength is 5 percent lower than last year, mainly because of large cuts to the Afghan National Police.

SIGAR said that the U.S. military continues to keep private other key data that would help gauge the progress of the United States' longest war, now in its 17th year.

U.S. Forces-Afghanistan did

recently release information related to population, control over land and other areas.

"While USFOR-A's action was helpful, it still entailed less detailed responses than SIGAR received previously in some areas," SIGAR said.

Still being kept from the public are casualty numbers and detailed performance assessments of Afghan forces, as well as the operational readiness of Army and police equipment, the watchdog said.

USFOR-A told SIGAR that much of the information was kept from the public at the request of the Afghan government.

Despite the drop in personnel, the Afghan government

made some modest improvements, SIGAR said.

As of Jan. 31, roughly 65 percent of the population lived in areas under government control or influence, up 1 percentage point since last quarter.

Insurgents continued to control or influence areas where 12 percent of the population lived — unchanged from last quarter — while the population living in contested areas decreased to roughly 23 percent, SIGAR said, citing USFOR-A data.

The government controlled or influenced 65.6 percent of the population and the insurgency only 9.2 percent, a slight improvement in recent months but down from the same period last year, SIGAR said.

Former Fitzgerald skipper's hearing slated for late May

BY TYLER HLAVAC

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL Base, Japan — An Article 32 hearing for the former commander of a guided-missile destroyer involved in a deadly collision last year has been scheduled for May 21, the Navy said Wednesday.

Cmdr. Bryce Benson — who helmed the USS Fitzgerald on June 17 when it ran into a container ship off the coast of Japan, killing seven sailors — faces charges that include negligent homicide, hazarding a ship and dereliction of duty. His hearing, which was originally slated for early March, was postponed after defense attorneys asked for more time.

On May 8, an unidentified Fitzgerald officer is scheduled for arraignment and to enter a plea on a charge of negligent

dereliction of duty resulting in death. The following day, a joint Article 32 hearing will take place for two junior Fitzgerald officers.

All hearings will be held at the Navy Yard in Washington.

An update on proceedings for the USS John S. McCain, which on Aug. 21 collided with an oil tanker near Singapore and killed 10 sailors, will be "forthcoming," the statement said. Cmdr. Alfredo Sanchez, the guided-missile destroyer's former skipper, faces charges similar to Benson's.

Navy investigations said both "avoidable" collisions were caused by failures in planning, training, procedures and operations. Part of that, the service found, was because of the intense operational pace the fleet has been maintaining in recent years.

The accidents left the Pacific

Fleet reeling and led to firings, forced retirements and nonjudicial punishments conducted by Adm. Frank Caldwell, who was tapped in October to oversee disciplinary actions for the accidents.

The Navy relieved the commanders of both ships, along with the head of the 7th Fleet and the leaders of Task Force 70 and Destroyer Squadron 15, which oversee the fleet's destroyers and cruisers.

Pacific Fleet Commander Adm. Scott Swift announced his retirement in September, and Vice Adm. Thomas Rowden, the former Naval Surface Force Pacific head, retired in January ahead of schedule after the recommendation of disciplinary actions against him.

During proceedings in late January, Caldwell found the Fitzgerald's executive officer,

command master chief and another officer guilty of dereliction in the performance of duties and issued letters of punitive reprimand.

An enlisted sailor from the McCain was also found guilty of dereliction of duties. He received a punitive letter of reprimand and forfeiture of half-pay for two months and a reduction in rate to the next pay grade — both delayed for six months.

In mid-February, Cmdr. Jessie Sanchez, executive officer on the McCain, was found guilty of dereliction of duty and received a punitive letter of reprimand.

Caldwell later dismissed charges against an officer and an enlisted crewmember from the Fitzgerald in what the Navy said would be the last planned nonjudicial punishment proceedings for the collisions.

Probe: Asbestos contamination at VA facility

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Management at the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital in Bedford, Mass., knew of an asbestos contamination for years but continued to put veterans and employees at risk of exposure, the U.S. Office of the Special Counsel said Tuesday.

In a letter Monday to President Donald Trump and members of the House and Senate veterans' affairs committees, Special Counsel Henry Kerner said multiple buildings at the Edith Nourse Rogers Memori-

al Veterans Hospital were contaminated with asbestos and that management had known about it since 2014.

"For years, the Bedford VA Medical Center failed to implement a robust safety inspection program to identify contaminated work spaces," Kerner said in a statement.

Whistleblowers at the facility alerted the special counsel to the contamination last year, and the VA Office of Occupational Safety and Health followed up with an investigation.

Investigators found several instances when workers were put at risk of exposure to air-

borne asbestos that could've been mitigated with better management practices. Because of the situation, "trust between management and employees is strained," the VA wrote in its report to the special counsel.

The VA substantiated that hospital management was first notified of the asbestos after a 2014 inspection by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. However, the agency asserted that managers did not break any rule or law.

"VA believes that the findings do not show evidence that the medical center or its employees engaged in gross

mismanagement and an abuse of authority," the VA report states. "There was no indication of willful intent to harm workers or violate standards, rule or law."

In his letter to Trump and Congress, Kerner declared the matter closed. The VA is required to update the special counsel on the situation in 60 days.

"The facility is now taking this problem seriously, monitoring employee health and carrying out more fulsome measures to ensure safety for employees and veterans," Kerner said.

Man who posted 'puppet oath' clip decries outcome

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

If Steven Mayne could do it all again, he would not have posted the video that went viral and led to the forced retirement of a Tennessee Air National Guard colonel for allowing a re-enlistment ceremony that included a dinosaur hand puppet.

"For the part I played in this, I truly am sorry," Mayne wrote in a guest column on Military.com on Sunday. "I'm unsure if there is any good that can be done here, but I ask the ad-

jutant general to reconsider these actions now that the fog of war has lifted and the media interest has waned. We need to make this right."

Air Guard Col. Kevin Blaser administered the oath on April 18 for Master Sgt. Robin Brown while she wore a dinosaur puppet on her raised right hand as it mouthed the oath she recited.

After Mayne posted the video on his "Air Force amn/nco/snco" Facebook page, it went viral and sparked outrage among some viewers who

thought the ceremony was conducted in an undignified manner. The video was picked up by myriad media outlets and garnered millions of views.

Five days later, Maj. Gen. Terry Haston, the Tennessee Air Guard's adjutant general, announced on Facebook that the colonel would be forced to retire and that Brown had been removed from her full-time position with the Tennessee Joint Public Affairs Office. It was later revealed that Brown would not be allowed to re-enlist.

A senior NCO who shot the

video was removed from his position as a unit first sergeant and received an official reprimand.

During the days before the Haston announcement, Mayne wrote that he had assumed Tennessee Air National Guard officials "would simply re-do the re-enlistment with minor administrative punishment and it would not be a big deal."

But Mayne, a retired Air Force master sergeant, said the punishment meted out was "entirely too harsh" and left him in "shock."

Okinawa headquarters renamed to honor MOH recipient

BY LEON COOK
Stars and Stripes

Marines and sailors on Okinawa, Japan, renamed a building to honor a Medal of Honor recipient who fought and died on the island during one of the bloodiest battles of World War II.

Troops from Combat Logistics Regiment 35, 3rd Marine Logistics Group, officially changed the name of their regimental headquarters at Camp

Kinser to Hauge Hall on Monday in recognition of Cpl. Louis Hauge, who was killed in the Battle of Okinawa on May 14, 1945.

"We are very honored to know that he is not forgotten, and that the Marines remember him," Hauge's nephew, Joe Braunschweig, said in a Marine Corps statement.

Hauge displayed uncommon valor when a squad from the 1st Marine Division got pinned

down by enemy mortar and machine-gun fire, according to his award citation. He sprinted toward two machine-gun emplacements, tossing hand grenades as he ran. He was wounded but destroyed both machine-gun nests before a Japanese sniper shot and killed him.

"We dedicated this building to Cpl. Hauge because ... we found out that his unit was dug in at this very camp," Col. Forrest Poole, commander of the

logistics regiment, said in the statement. "He and his unit defended this position while Marines traveled here to assist the southern assault."

A native of Ada, Minn., Hauge joined the Marine Corps Reserve in 1943 as a light machine-gunner. He saw combat on Peleliu, Palau, and was awarded a meritorious promotion to corporal. He was a squad leader by the time the Marines stormed Okinawa.

US monitors Russian influence in Balkans

BY SLOBODAN LEKIC

Stars and Stripes

BELGRADE, Serbia — When Serbia's leader was recently confronted with an unexpected political flare-up in the breakaway province of Kosovo, he immediately rang Russian President Vladimir Putin to ask for support.

"Putin stressed that Serbia is the key partner of Russia in the Balkans (and) in Europe, and that the Russian Federation will support the Republic of Serbia," President Aleksandar Vucic said.

The move was the latest example of the increasingly close ties between the two nations. These have raised concerns in Western capitals that Moscow is trying to turn Serbia — which borders five NATO nations — into its bridgehead in the Balkans, a region that has been relatively tranquil since the wars that marked the Yugoslav federation's collapse in the 1990s.

In March, U.S. European Command chief Gen. Curtis M. Scaparrotti identified Russia's overt and covert "malign influence" in the region as one of his key concerns. "Russia is at work in the Balkans, and we have kind of taken our eye off the area," he said during Senate testimony.

"Russia is carrying out a campaign of destabilization to change the international order, fracture NATO and undermine U.S. leadership around the world," Scaparrotti added.

Many Serbian analysts who support the country's stated policy of joining the European Union have also voiced concern that the country risks becoming a battleground between East and West.

"Serbia is not just a 'key partner' of Russia; it's Russia's only ally in Europe right now," said Milan Culibrk, editor-in-chief of Belgrade's independent NIN newsmagazine.

Signs of Russia's popularity are everywhere in downtown Belgrade. Dozens of vendors in the main pedestrian street peddle T-shirts emblazoned with Putin's picture and Russian flags. Russian banks are ubiquitous, and Russian-owned gas stations line the highways — al-

though the European Union is by far Serbia's largest trading partner.

Russia has established a "humanitarian" center in the southern city of Nis, which some foreign diplomats believe could easily morph into an intelligence-gathering facility.

A massive new statue of Russia's last czar, Nicholas II, has been erected on a square facing the presidential office.

The history

After the ouster of former strongman President Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, Serbia sought to mend ties with the West. The U.S. and the West have conducted military training with Serbia and offered diplomatic and trade overtures.

While those olive branches have been accepted, they haven't gained the West much influence.

Much of the pro-Russia sentiment and bitterness toward the West stems from the U.S.-led NATO aerial onslaughts on Serbia and Serbs in Bosnia in the 1990s. In 1995, NATO bombed Bosnian Serb forces, and in 1999 the alliance bombed Serbia for 78 days. It forced Serbia out of Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008 in a move Serbia refuses to recognize.

"It's very simple why Serbs like Russia so much," said Miroslav Lazanski, a military analyst who hosts a weekly program on the Kremlin-owned Sputnik radio network. "The United States and NATO bombed us, tore Kosovo away from Serbia and now demand that we 'love' them. In contrast, Russia has supported Serbia and has stood by us over the Kosovo issue."

Tabloids laud Putin

Serbian tabloids, by far the biggest source of print information in the country, run daily stories extolling Russian scientific and other achievements, the strength of the Russian military and Putin's political prowess. Those are then contrasted negatively to NATO's "aggressiveness" and the EU's internal problems.

The content is often supplied by Russian outlets such as the

Kremlin-owned Sputnik agency and republished for free by the Serbian media.

Among broadcast outlets, Pink TV and Happy TV — the country's most popular television networks — offer a steady diet of talk shows featuring pro-Russia commentators and Serbian ultranationalists lauding Russia and disparaging the West. A favorite topic in the tabloids and on TV talk shows is the alleged cancer epidemic sweeping Serbia and causing tens of thousands of deaths — all supposedly caused by NATO's use of depleted uranium munitions during the 1999 bombing campaign. Statements by the official medical authorities that the cancer rate has remained steady since the 1970s are dismissed out of hand.

"This narrative has been carefully cultivated over the years such that Russian government disinformation campaigns find very fertile ground among the population of Serbia," said a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report.

Public opinion polls show that up to four-fifths of Serbs consider Russia their natural ally and that many have a negative view of the West. This despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of Serbs live and work in Germany, Austria and other EU countries and that their remittances are a major part of the country's gross domestic product.

Historic ties

Serbs and Russians have deep historic ties dating to Serbia's fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Serbia's dominant Orthodox church, which is closely linked to its Russian counterpart, continually stresses the religious and cultural ties between the two Slavic nations.

Moscow also refuses to recognize Kosovo, where U.S. troops have been deployed in a peacekeeping role since 1999. Without Russia's recognition, Kosovo cannot join the United Nations and thus remains in international limbo a decade after independence.

"The West is only just now

waking up to this fact the Kosovo issue plays a large role in Russia's penetration of Serbia," said Bosko Jaksic, an independent political analyst. "Putin is probably using this to set up an outpost here in order to show the West that Russia is a power to be reckoned with in the Balkans."

Under Vucic, a former pro-Russia ultranationalist-turned-reformer, the government's official strategic policy goal is to join the EU. Yet Vucic regularly slams the West — and particularly the United States — for the countries' stand on Serbia over Kosovo and other issues. In contrast, he has never mentioned Russia in any negative context, Jaksic said.

Deep devotion

Western diplomats have repeatedly called on Belgrade to gradually align its foreign policies with the EU — one of the key conditions for membership. But no movement in that direction has been registered in the last several years, said a senior diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Instead, pro-Russia ministers, such as Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic and Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin, have been advocating even closer military, economic and political ties with Moscow. And some top officials have publicly stated that Serbia will never cut its ties to Russia even at the cost of not joining the EU.

In the past several months, Washington, the EU and NATO — which until now have been focused mainly on the Russian threat in the Baltics and Poland — have woken up to the threat of Moscow's quiet infiltration into the Balkans, where it has already been stirring trouble in neighboring Montenegro, but also in Bosnia and Macedonia.

Montenegro became the 29th member of NATO last year, a step that was bitterly criticized by Russia. Montenegrin and Western officials believe that a coup attempt in 2016 that involved two Russian intelligence agents and several Serbian nationals was orchestrated by the Kremlin to destabilize the country ahead of its NATO accession.

Pentagon IG considers probe of Ronny Jackson allegations

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Pentagon investigators are mulling an official probe into allegations that Rear Adm. Ronny Jackson, the failed nominee to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs, regularly behaved improperly as the top physician of the White House Medical Unit, Defense Department officials confirmed Tuesday.

The department's inspector general has received the allegations and is determining whether they merit a formal investigation of Jackson, said Tom Crosson, a spokesman for the Pentagon. Jackson has served as the top physician to President Donald Trump and former President Barack Obama since 2013. He withdrew his nomination last week to serve as Trump's VA chief amid accusations that included overprescribing medications and drinking on duty.

The initial IG inquiry is focused on determining "what investigations and reviews have already been conducted related to these issues, any jurisdictional issues that may relate to the allegations, and the scope of the allegations and complaints related to these issues," Crosson said.

The probe threatens to derail Jackson's future with the Navy. The one-star admiral remains on active duty and was nominated in March to receive a second star before Trump unexpectedly tapped him for the VA's top job. That promotion remains pending with the Senate Armed Services Committee, documents show.

Democrats on that committee, which approves promotions of senior military officers, have called for the allegations to be investigated before lawmakers consider Jackson's promotion. A committee official declined to comment on the nomination.

Navy officials also declined Tuesday to discuss the nomination or any past or present investigations by the service into the allegations raised against Jackson.

For now, Jackson remains in his position at the White House, a spokesman said Tuesday, denying media reports that he would not continue as Trump's physician.

"Rear Admiral Ronny Jackson is currently on active duty, assigned to the White House as deputy assistant to the president," said Raj Shah, White House principal deputy press secretary. "Despite published reports, there are no personnel

announcements at this time."

Jackson has served 23 years as a Navy physician, including a tour in 2005 as an emergency medicine physician in Iraq. He has worked in the White House Medical Unit since 2006 during former President George W. Bush's administration. Obama nominated him to lead the White House's team of physicians in 2013.

Last week, Democrats on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee released some of the accusations made against Jackson by 23 of his current and former coworkers in the White House Medical Unit. They portrayed Jackson as an unstable and power-hungry leader who drank on duty and freely handed out prescription medications.

Initially raised by Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., the ranking member on the veterans affairs committee, the allegations included dispensing the narcotic Percocet without proper paperwork and of drunkenly wrecking a government vehicle during a Secret Service party.

Jackson has denied the allegations, which have not been substantiated. Nonetheless, he withdrew from consideration to serve as VA secretary Thursday.

Mueller's questions for Trump revealed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The New York Times late Monday published the nearly four dozen questions the special counsel investigating Russian election interference gave to President Donald Trump's attorneys, covering Trump's motivations for firing FBI Director James Comey last May and contacts between Trump campaign officials and Russians.

Trump said Tuesday it's "disgraceful" that the list of questions that the special counsel wants to ask him was "leaked" to the news media.

"It is so disgraceful that the questions concerning the Russian Witch Hunt were 'leaked' to the media," Trump tweeted Tuesday. "No questions on Collusion. Oh, I see...you have a made up, phony crime, Collusion, that never existed, and an investigation begun with illegally leaked classified information. Nice!"

The questions appear to indicate that Mueller is looking into possible collusion. Some touch on Russian meddling and whether the Trump campaign coordinated in any way with the Kremlin.

Although Mueller's team has indicated to Trump's lawyers that he's not considered a target, investigators remain interested in whether the president's actions constitute obstruction of justice and want to interview him about several episodes in office.

Many of the questions obtained by the Times center on the obstruction issue, including his reaction to Attorney General Jeff Sessions' recusal from the Russia investigation, a decision Trump has angrily criticized.

Trump lawyer Jay Sekulow declined to comment to The Associated Press on Monday night, as did White House lawyer Ty Cobb.

Prepare for an expensive driving season

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Get ready for a little bit more pain at the gas pump this summer.

Crude oil prices are at the highest level in more than three years and are expected to keep climbing, pushing up gasoline prices along the way.

The U.S. daily national average for regular gasoline is now \$2.81 per gallon. That's up from about \$2.38 per gallon a year ago, according to Oil Price Information Service. Across the U.S., 16 percent of gas stations

are charging more than \$3 per gallon, according to AAA.

"This will be the most expensive driving season since 2014," said Tom Kloza, global head of energy analysis for Oil Price Information Service.

Drivers in Western states such as California, Oregon, Washington and Nevada, as well as Alaska and Hawaii, are paying the most at the pump, according to AAA. The average retail price in those states ranges from \$3.19 to \$3.61 per gallon.

Average retail gasoline prices are lowest in a swath of states in the South and Southeast, including Louisiana and Alabama. These two states have the cheapest gas in the country at \$2.54 and \$2.56 per gallon, respectively, according to AAA.

For all of 2018, EIA expects that the national retail price for all grades of gasoline will average \$2.76 a gallon. That would translate into an additional \$190 spent on fuel by the average U.S. household this year compared with last year, the agency said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Graduation ceremony crashed by pelicans

CA MALIBU — A pair of pelicans crashed a graduation ceremony at Pepperdine University in the California beachfront community of Malibu over the weekend.

The long-beaked birds flew in Saturday as the class of 2018 was receiving diplomas outdoors on a lawn overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Video broadcast by KABC-TV shows one of the big birds landed among seated observers, who tossed it back into the air, only to have it land on a red carpet at the center of the ceremony.

The pelican resisted efforts by several men to get it to move along. It finally waddled away.

Watermelon spill causes deadly crash

PA PHILADELPHIA — Watermelons that spilled from an overturned tractor-trailer on an interstate off-ramp in Philadelphia on Saturday hit a car on the road below, causing a deadly crash.

Police said the truck flipped as it exited the northbound lanes of Interstate 95.

The watermelons spilled onto southbound lanes of I-95, hitting a car and causing the driver to lose control. A passenger in that car, Thanh Tam Nguyen, 61, of Glenolden, was killed in the crash. The driver was hospitalized.

Police arrest man after 40-mile chase

CT GUILFORD — Connecticut State Police arrested an 18-year-old man they say led officers on a 40-mile, high-speed pursuit with three juveniles in his stolen car.

Police said the chase started

about 3 a.m. Monday in Westport. The car went north on Interstate 95 and, at one point, the occupants abandoned the vehicle and got into another car.

The switch was caught by highway surveillance cameras, and police eventually stopped the second car on the highway in Guilford by using tire-deflation devices.

The driver, Jordan Butler, of Waterbury, was arrested on several charges, including reckless driving. The three juvenile occupants of the vehicle were released to the custody of their parents.

Police say man ate burrito after stabbing

NM GALLUP — A New Mexico man is facing charges after deputies say he stabbed another man during an alcohol-fueled fight, then took a “burrito break.”

The Gallup Independent reported Lucas Martinez, of Cochiti Pueblo, was arrested in Gallup following the violent altercation.

A McKinley County Sheriff's Office report says deputy Brandon Salazar found Vernon Tso, 37, with stab wounds on his hand. When Salazar asked Tso who stabbed him, the report says the victim pointed to the kitchen table, where Martinez calmly was eating a burrito.

Salazar said Martinez became confrontational when he saw the deputy. He had to be restrained, the report says. Martinez is facing a charge of aggravated battery with a deadly weapon.

Facility gets chance to raise baby octopuses

AK KENAI — Alaska's SeaLife Center is getting its third shot at raising thousands of octopus hatch-

lings, hoping at least one of the translucent mollusks will grow into its 50-pound, color-changing form.

The Peninsula Clarion reported that such a task has been completed just once before — by the Seattle Aquarium in the 1980s. The SeaLife Center had giant pacific octopus hatchlings twice before, in 2005 and 2013.

This time, the center's octopus Gilligan has raised about 100 eggs into hatchlings, with more to come. The center says giant pacific octopuses usually lay a clutch of between 20,000 and 80,000 eggs, from which about 1 percent of the young survive in the wild; rates are even lower in captivity.

Police say man stole car with baby inside

FL ST. PETERSBURG — Police said a man who stole a car with a baby inside was caught driving another stolen car.

A St. Petersburg police Facebook posts says Rashad Webb, 19, is accused of stealing the vehicle with the child inside on April 23.

Webb told police he realized the baby was inside the car and dropped him off in a parking lot, where the child was found. News outlets reported the 8-month-old was found by a news crew working on a story.

Officers spotted Webb early Thursday and he drove off at a high rate of speed but eventually stopped and surrendered, police said. He was charged with child abuse and other charges.

Zoo welcomes its first baby wallaby

MD SALISBURY — The Salisbury Zoo has announced the arrival of its first baby wallaby.

Wallabies are a close cousin

to the kangaroo found in Australia and surrounding islands. They're also known as joeys.

Zookeepers had noticed changes with one of the zoo's female Bennett's wallabies. Her pouch appeared to be getting larger and at times movement was detected. Eventually, a small head peeked out.

In April, the joey began making short appearances outside its mother's pouch.

Dog in shelter for 420 days finds home

NV LAS VEGAS — A dog has found a permanent home after spending nearly 14 months at a Las Vegas animal shelter.

KLAS-TV reported a family adopted 6-year-old Mona after visiting the Animal Foundation on Saturday.

Mona, who was found in 2012 as a stray and had been back to the shelter a couple of times since then, had been at the shelter for 420 days.

Woman sentenced for food stamps fraud

MA WORCESTER — A Massachusetts businesswoman has been sentenced to eight months in prison for defrauding the federal government of nearly \$300,000 in a cash-for-food stamps scheme.

Esther Acquaye, who owned Esther's Fashion Paradise in Worcester, was also sentenced to three years of probation and ordered to pay about \$285,000 in restitution.

Federal prosecutors say Acquaye, 49, paid some customers 50 cents for every Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program dollar and received the full value of the benefits from the government.

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Showalter aims to turn Orioles around

Associated Press

The last time the Baltimore Orioles began a season this poorly, Buck Showalter was brought in to restore order to the floundering franchise.

Now, Showalter finds himself in a similar mess.

Back in 2010, the Orioles stumbled to a 1-11 start and were 5-18 at the end of April. They fired manager Dave Trembley in June and continued to slide under interim manager Juan Samuel before Showalter came aboard and guided Baltimore to 34 wins in its final 57 games.

Showalter has since taken the Orioles to the postseason on three occasions.

This year, however, he's had to deal with a team plagued by injuries, lackluster hitting and inconsistent pitching.

With guys like Anthony Santander, Danny Valencia, Chance Sisco and Craig Gentry getting significant playing time, it's no wonder Baltimore (8-20) has a minus-54 run differential and is deep in last place in the AL East.

That would be acceptable if the Orioles were tanking, but they fully expected to compete for a playoff spot this season.

Vice president of baseball operations

Dan Duquette resisted trade offers for pending free agent Manny Machado over the winter and added veterans Alex Cobb and Andrew Cashner to a starting rotation that featured the home-grown talent of Dylan Bundy and Kevin Gausman.

Unfortunately, things went awry well before opening day. Slugger Mark Trumbo (quad strain) and closer Zach Britton (Achilles tendon) began the season in the disabled list and were soon joined by All-Star second baseman Jonathan Schoop (oblique), outfielder Colby Rasmus (hip flexor) and third baseman Tim Beckham, who will be sidelined for the next six weeks after undergoing core surgery.

That opened the door for a variety of players who would otherwise be on the bench or in the minor leagues.

"There's a great opportunity here for some people, and they're trying to take advantage of it — mostly because we have a need," Showalter said.

Through the weekend, however, Santander — a Rule 5 pick — was batting .213 and Valencia was at .204. Sisco, a rookie catcher who replaced struggling starter Caleb Joseph early on, was hitting a comparatively robust .255.

But hey, they're not the only players

struggling at the plate. Chris Davis has a .167 batting average, two home runs and six RBIs, just three years after signing a \$161 million contract that the Orioles are stuck with through 2022.

"I'm sure there's the inner pressure to live up to (expectations)," Showalter said. "It's eating at him."

Beckham was hitting .179 before going on the DL, Adam Jones is at .239 and Joseph is sputtering at .137.

The lone player with a hot bat has been Machado (.361, nine HRs, 22 RBIs), who might not be around past July if the Orioles can't turn things around.

"I know what Manny's done. Special player," Tampa Bay Rays manager Kevin Cash said. "But then you look at Jonathan Schoop, another special player that's not there. They've been banged up, snakebit a little bit by the injuries. But they've got guys that are very capable of getting hot, and when they do, they can hit ball out of anywhere, put a lot of runs on the board."

The Orioles haven't abandoned hope of bouncing back. After all, Trumbo was slated to make his debut Tuesday, when the calendar flipped to May.

MLB roundup

Bogaerts helps BoSox cap historic April

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Boston Red Sox slammed their way through their most wins in April ever.

Xander Bogaerts hit a grand slam over the Green Monster and Boston finished April by beating the Kansas City Royals 10-6 on Monday night.

Mitch Moreland hit a solo homer and had three hits along with Bogaerts for the Red Sox, who posted their 19th victory in April. They had reached 18 three times, the last coming in their World Series-winning 2013 season.

It was Boston's sixth slam of the season — all coming in April — and tied them with 1996 Montreal Expos for most ever in the majors by May 1. The Red Sox didn't even hit one last season.

"I didn't hit a grand slam in my career, it's not because of

me," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said, breaking into a smile.

Bogaerts had a simple answer.

"Especially with the bases loaded, we're getting some good swings," he said. "I think we've been really selective and looking for some good pitches to hit."

Despite playing, at times, in lousy conditions at home — like Monday night when it was chilly with temperatures in the mid-40s and a light rain falling most of the game — the Red Sox offense continues to hit homers unlike the team that was last in the AL in 2017.

Astros 2, Yankees 1: Charlie Morton pitched two-hit ball into the eighth inning and struck out 10 as host Houston snapped New York's nine-game winning streak.

Diamondbacks 8, Dodgers

5: A.J. Pollock hit three home runs and host Arizona topped Los Angeles in the opener of a four-game series.

Giants 6, Padres 5: Pinch-hitter Nick Hundley lined a two-run single off San Diego closer Brad Hand (1-3) with two outs in the ninth inning to give host San Francisco a comeback victory.

Cubs 3, Rockies 2: Jon Lester pitched effectively into the sixth inning, continuing an impressive stretch for Chicago's rotation and helping his team beat visiting Colorado for its season-high fifth straight victory.

Brewers 6, Reds 5: Homers by Manny Pina and Lorenzo Cain ended Milwaukee's historically bad slump, and Domingo Santana doubled home the go-ahead runs in the seventh inning for a victory over host Cincinnati.

Indians 7, Rangers 5: Jose Ramirez's RBI double broke an eighth-inning tie and host Cleveland rallied for a win over Texas.

Nationals 3, Pirates 2: Tanner Roark (2-2) pitched seven efficient innings and drove in his first run since 2016, and host Washington beat Pittsburgh.

Blue Jays 7, Twins 5: Justin Smoak and Russell Martin homered, Yangervis Solarte had three hits and visiting Toronto edged Minnesota.

Marlins 8, Phillies 4: Brian Anderson homered, drove in four runs and made a diving catch in right field with the bases loaded to preserve a lead, helping host Miami beat Jake Arrieta (3-1) and Philadelphia.

Rays 3, Tigers 2: C.J. Cron and Brad Miller each homered in the ninth inning and visiting Tampa Bay held on for a victory over Detroit.

Justify early favorite in Kentucky Derby

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Justify has been made the early 3-1 favorite for the Kentucky Derby, with Europe-based Mendelssohn the second choice in a full field of 20 horses.

Trained by four-time Derby winner Bob Baffert, Justify drew the No. 7 post on Tuesday. Six horses have won from there, most recently Street Sense in 2007.

Justify, the undefeated winner of the Santa Anita Derby, is one of two horses in Saturday's 1¼-mile race who didn't race at age 2. The other is 6-1 third choice Magnum Moon. No horse since Apollo in 1882 has won the Derby after not racing as a 2-year-old.

"I don't buy into the Apollo Curse or whatever at all, mainly because Bob Baffert and Todd Pletcher have got the horses," four-time Derby-winning trainer D. Wayne Lukas said. "Todd's going to have his (horse) ready, and Baffert is going to have his."

Justify is 3-0 in his brief career, winning by a combined 20 lengths. Magnum Moon is 4-0, winning the Arkansas Derby and Rebel Stakes in his last two starts.

"It's one of the toughest Derbies I've ever seen," Baffert said. "All the important horses got good draws."

More history is working against Mendelssohn. A horse coming from Europe has never won America's biggest race. Trained by Irishman Aidan O'Brien, UAE Derby winner Mendelssohn is the 5-1 second choice. He drew the No. 14 post.

Pletcher has a leading four horses in the field: Magnum Moon, 8-1 Audible, 12-1 Vino Rosso and 30-1 Noble Indy. Pletcher surpassed mentor D. Wayne Lukas this year as the trainer with the most starters in Derby history with 52.

The main starting gate holds 14 horses and a six-stall auxiliary gate is attached. Horses are loaded into the gate two at a

time, beginning with posts one and 11, which spend the most time waiting for the start.

"Having three of the four horses in the auxiliary gate wasn't what we were hoping for," Pletcher said. "Sometimes you can work out good trips from out there. We've got four terrific riders."

The co-fourth choices are 8-1: Audible and Bolt d'Oro.

Bolt d'Oro has won four of six career starts for trainer and owner Mick Ruis. The colt drew the No. 11 post, which means he will be waiting the longest for the gate to open. Firenze Fire drew the dreaded No. 1 post and also will be standing the longest.

"We're good," Ruis said. "Bolt is so well-minded that he doesn't work himself up."

Baffert's other entry, 30-1 shot Solomini, drew the No. 17 post, which has never produced a Derby winner.

Lukas, the 82-year-old Hall of Famer, has his 49th Derby starter in Bravazo. The colt

is one of five 50-1 shots in the field. In that group is Lone Sailor, owned by Gayle Benson, the widow of New Orleans Saints owner Tom Benson.

Seven horses were listed at 30-1 by Churchill Downs oddsmaker Mike Battaglia: Free Drop Billy, Promises Fulfilled, Flameaway, My Boy Jack, Enticed, Solomini and Noble Indy.

The Desormeaux brothers have teamed with My Boy Jack. Kent Desormeaux, a three-time Derby winner, will ride, while Keith Desormeaux does the training.

The field is limited to the top 20 horses based on points earned in designated prep races.

Twenty-one horses were entered. The 21st horse on the points list is Blended Citizen, who would need a defection by early Friday morning to get into the 144th edition of the race.

If all 20 horses start, the total purse would be \$2,192,000. The winner earns \$1,432,000. Post time is 6:46 p.m. EDT.

Celtics' youth movement stops 'The Process' in Game 1

Associated Press

BOSTON — Boston's rising stars stalled The Process and led the Celtics to victory in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference semifinals.

Substitute point guard Terry Rozier scored 29, and first-year Celtics forward Jayson Tatum had a career-high 28 points to outplay redshirt rookie Ben Simmons on Monday night and lead Boston to a 117-101 victory over the Philadelphia 76ers.

With much of the attention focused on 76ers youngsters Simmons and Joel Embiid, Boston's youth movement of Tatum and Rozier led the way. Two days after scoring a career playoff-high 26 points in Game 7 against Milwaukee, Rozier topped it, while also adding eight rebounds and six assists.

"It's been a dream come true. I want to keep going," said Rozier, who was wearing a Drew

Bledsoe Patriots jersey to milk one more chuckle out of his pseudo-feud with vanquished Bucks guard Eric Bledsoe. "I'm just a guy just living in the moment."

Embiid scored 31 points with 13 rebounds for Philadelphia, which lost for just the second time in 22 games. Simmons, the likely rookie of the year, scored 18 with seven rebounds and six assists.

But with six days of rest since eliminating Miami, the 76ers missed 15 of their first 20 shots and hit five of 26 from three-point range to lose for just the second time since March 13.

"We're NBA players and we have to be ready," Embiid said. "We weren't ready tonight."

Al Horford had 26 points and seven rebounds for Boston, which will host Game 2 on Thursday night. The Celtics are hoping to have guard Jay-

len Brown back from a hamstring injury he sustained in the clincher against the Bucks, leaving him sidelined along with Kyrie Irving and Gordon Hayward.

Playing in place of Irving, Rozier picked up where he left off in the first round by scoring 10 points with six assists in the first quarter on Monday night. He was 7-for-9 from three-point range overall, combining with Tatum to overshadow the lottery picks accumulated by Philadelphia during The Process.

The first overall pick in the 2016 draft who sat out all of last year with an injury, Simmons was heckled by the Boston crowd with chants of "Not a rookie!" In the fourth quarter, as Tatum stepped to the free-throw line to protect a double-digit lead, the chant turned to "He's a rookie!"

"I love when people talk trash," Embiid said. "Keep bringing it, and we'll see how it goes."

Tatum was Boston's first pick last year — third overall — after swapping the No. 1 pick to the Sixers and grabbing a 2018 first-rounder as well. Philadelphia picked Markelle Fultz; he did not play on Monday night.

"It's been great to see Jayson and Terry and just our guys play like that," Horford said. "I think that Jayson's starting to figure it out. ... And it's great to see for our team."

It was 33-all with just over seven minutes left in the half when the Celtics ran off 10 points in a row. Horford had four of the five baskets and assisted on the other. Boston led 87-70 in the final minute of the third quarter when Philadelphia scored nine straight points to make it a nine-point game.

Karlsson's OT goal lifts Golden Knights

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — William Karlsson and the expansion Vegas Golden Knights proved they can handle some adversity just as well as they can thrive as front-runners like they did most of their inaugural season.

The Golden Knights bounced back after allowing a late tying goal in regulation when Karlsson scored 8:17 into overtime to lead Vegas to a 4-3 victory over the San Jose Sharks on Monday night and a 2-1 series lead.

"I think it's good for the morale," Karlsson said. "We showed great attitude. Again, they came back. It was tough, too, but we gave someone a chance to be an overtime hero."

Karlsson was that hero — just as he has been so much this season. He scored 43 goals in the regular season and has added three more this series, but none was bigger than the wrist shot in transition that beat Martin Jones high to the stick side, sending the Golden

Knights into a wild celebration around the player known as Wild Bill.

It was an impressive bounce back from their first loss of the playoffs in double overtime at home in Game 2 and wouldn't have been possible without Marc-Andre Fleury, who made 39 saves to hold off an early push by the Sharks and then robbed Logan Couture with a glove save in overtime.

"I was looking at the guy with the puck. I just tried to follow the pass and get out there a bit and I had a little time to react on it," Fleury said. "It was a good feeling."

The Sharks rallied to tie the game and force a second straight overtime with two goals in the third period. Evander Kane scored just seconds after the end of a power play midway through the third to set the stage for Tomas Hertl.

Hertl drove to the net with a strong power move. With the Sharks swarming in front of Fleury, Hertl whacked at a loose puck and knocked it in

for the equalizer with 1:57 to go, sending the towel-waving crowd into a frenzy.

"I believe our game's there and I think everyone in here would tell you that," captain Joe Pavelski said. "We got caught on the wrong end of it tonight. We had a big one the other night."

Colin Miller, Jonathan Marchessault and Reilly Smith scored in a span of less than five minutes in the second period to put the Golden Knights in control, but they couldn't hold onto the lead.

Timo Meier opened the scoring with a power-play goal for the Sharks, but undisciplined play in the second period helped erase that lead and put San Jose in a hole.

Brenden Dillon held David Perron to give Vegas a power play less than a minute after Meier's one-timer off a perfect cross-ice pass from Chris Tierney gave the Sharks the lead.

San Jose had an 11-1 edge in shots on goal in the period at that point as the Sharks were

controlling the play. But that quickly turned as James Neal held the puck below the goal line and fed Miller with a pass that Marc-Edouard Vlasic nearly broke up for a tap-in that tied the game.

About three minutes later, Hertl was called for roughing Neal well behind the play, giving the Golden Knights another chance with the man advantage.

They converted again when Marchessault one-timed a cross-ice pass from Alex Tuch past Jones to give Vegas the lead.

Smith then capped the three goals in 4:46 when Marchessault fed Karlsson, who was left alone at the side of the net. He deftly sent a blind, backhand pass through the crease to Smith, who tapped it in for the 3-1 lead.

"He's got eyes in the back of his head sometimes," Smith said. "He's a great player and he makes great plays."

Top seed Tampa bounces back in Game 2, evens series

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — The Tampa Bay Lightning have been just as resilient in the Stanley Cup playoffs as they've been all season.

Challenged by coach Jon Cooper to compete harder and raise their level of play after dropping the opener of their second-round series against the Boston Bruins, the top seed in the Eastern Conference responded with a 4-2 victory in Game 2 of the best-of-seven matchup Monday night.

Brayden Point had an empty-net goal and three assists. He also teamed with Tyler Johnson and Ondrej Palat to slow down Boston's high-scoring line of Patrice Bergeron, David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand.

Game 3 is Wednesday night in Boston.

"It feels good. I thought we

played well," Point said after posting just the third four-point game in Tampa Bay's history. "We had a tough night in Game 1. I thought we came back tonight knowing we'd end up better."

Point assisted on Tampa Bay's first three goals before sealing the win with his empty-netter with 25.2 seconds left.

Yanni Gourde had a first-period goal and Johnson and Palat also scored for the Lightning, who rebounded from a 6-2 loss in Game 1.

"We needed to have a bounce back, we needed to have an answer, and I thought we did that," Johnson said. "I thought we competed really hard, I thought we played well and we got rewarded with some chances and some opportunities."

Bergeron, Pastrnak and Marchand combined for three goals and 11 points in the open-

er, with most of the damage coming while Point's line was trying to contain them. They had four more points in Game 2, but were unable to take over the game.

Cooper said he never considered changing the matchup against Boston's top line.

"I honestly didn't. ... We know they can do it. We have faith in them, and I thought they were outstanding tonight," Cooper said before turning his attention back to Point.

"The kid's a hockey player and he competes hard," Cooper said. "Trust me, if there was any talk of pulling him off that line, I think those three guys would have marched right into my room and said, 'What are you doing?'"

Charlie McAvoy scored for the Bruins late in the first period. Torey Krug's late goal trimmed Tampa Bay's lead to

3-2 with just over four minutes remaining.

Tampa Bay's Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 18 shots. Tuukka Rask finished with 27 saves for Boston.

"They lost 6-2 at home and didn't feel good about their game. So, you've got to expect they're going to come out and play hard," Boston coach Bruce Cassidy said. "I expect it in Game 3 going forward. They'll play hard and so will we."

The Lightning had nearly twice as many scoring opportunities as the Bruins in the series opener and controlled play early Monday night, getting off the first 10 shots of the game and taking a 1-0 lead on Gourde's power-play goal at 11:47 of the first period.

McAvoy's goal, with Bergeron and Marchand assisting, made it 1-1. Pastrnak and Marchand set up Krug's goal.