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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Shots fired across DMZ after Kim returns

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North and South Korean troops exchanged gunfire across the heavily fortified border Sunday, the South Korean military said, in the first shooting in the area in more than two years.

The incident occurred a day after North Korea released photos of leader Kim Jong Un making his first public appearance in nearly three weeks, tamping down speculation about his health.

The U.S.-led United Nations Command, which administers the area, said that it will investigate whether there was a violation of the armistice which has existed since the 1950-53 Korean War.

The North Koreans fired first, with several bullets hitting a South Korean guard post at about 7:41 a.m. in a central part of the Demilitarized Zone, according to the Joint Chiefs of

Staff in Seoul.

South Korean troops responded by firing 20 rounds of warning shots on two occasions and broadcasting warnings over loudspeakers, it said.

No casualties or significant damage were reported on the South Korean side.

South Korea later sent a notice calling for an explanation from the North Korean side via an inter-Korean communication line, but did not immediately receive a response, according to the JCS.

A JCS officer said that the shooting did not appear to be an intentional provocation, although the military will analyze the evidence, including shells found at the scene.

“It was quite foggy and the North Korean soldiers usually rotate shifts around that time,” the JCS officer was quoted as saying by the Yonhap News Agency. He added that no other suspicious military activities had been detected on the North

Korean side.

“We think those are accidental,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on ABC’s “This Week.” “South Koreans did return fire. So far as we can tell, there was no loss of life on either side.”

The United Nations Command said that it was aware of the incident and was “cooperating closely” with the South Korean military to assess and monitor the situation.

“UNC will conduct a thorough investigation ... to determine if there was an Armistice Agreement violation, and will provide the report to the appropriate authorities once completed,” spokesman Army Col. Lee Peters said in a statement.

The UNC initially said that the investigation would begin Monday, but later said that the date has yet to be confirmed.

Sunday’s shootings were the first in the DMZ since November 2017, when North Korean soldiers fired at a comrade as

he fled across the border to defect to the South.

The two Koreas agreed to disarm soldiers guarding a joint area and remove several guard posts and mines in a 2018 bid to ease tensions and eliminate the potential for misunderstandings.

North Korea has been shrouded in mystery in recent weeks, as Kim remained out of the public eye, leading to rampant speculation and unconfirmed reports that he was ill or possibly even dead.

State-run media reported Saturday, however, that Kim had attended the opening of a fertilizer factory near Pyongyang the day before to mark May Day.

Trump, who has insisted that he and Kim maintain a good relationship despite deadlock, retweeted photos of Kim at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

“I, for one, am glad to see he is back, and well!” Trump said in a tweet.

‘Mountain of mail’ sent after backlog from virus

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

Disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic led the Navy to send more than 40,000 pounds of backlogged mail to sailors throughout the Mediterranean via a “back door” through Bahrain and Africa.

Many of the commercial flights typically used to transport military mail from the U.S. to Europe, Africa and the Middle East were canceled, Navy officials said.

To get it all overseas, the service devised a “one-off” operation, routing it from Chicago to Bahrain, then on to Camp Lemonnier in the tiny East African country of Djibouti, where twice-weekly airlift missions dubbed “CLDJ Express” had been bringing critical medical supplies from Europe.

“Our N4 logistics team immediately vol-

unteered ... to receive and push this mountain of mail to Europe on emerging ‘CLDJ Express’ missions,” Cmdr. Dustin Freeman, supply officer for the Djibouti base, said in a statement last week.

Those airlift missions, which some officials have also called “COVID Express,” were flown by C-40 Clippers of Commander Task Force 63, the Navy’s logistics arm for Europe and Africa, based in Naples, Italy.

The flights also transported frozen samples for coronavirus testing from Djibouti to Rota, Spain, and on to Germany, officials said in a statement last month.

From March 30 through April 25, Navy Lt. Russell Farr led a cargo team that worked 14-hour days to clear the nearly 200 mail pallets through Djiboutian customs and loaded it onto waiting C-40s for delivery, said Jeff Criger, supply chain di-

rector at the logistics center in Sigonella, Sicily.

Criger’s center worked with its counterpart in Bahrain on the “team effort ... to meet all the planning factors required to guarantee success for this massive undertaking,” he said.

The “critical quality of life mission” was also assisted by the Air Force’s air terminal team in Djibouti.

In Europe, the postal backlog has “pretty much been cleaned out,” but packages and boxes were still cluttering up post offices, said Rear Adm. Yancy Lindsey, commander of Navy Region Europe, Africa and Central.

“Go to the post office and get your mail,” Lindsey said in a town hall video meeting last week. “They don’t want to work around this stuff anymore.”

Most states falling short of minimum testing

Associated Press

ATLANTA — As more states begin to relax their coronavirus lockdowns, most are falling short of the minimum levels of testing suggested by the federal government and recommended by a variety of public health researchers, an Associated Press analysis has found.

Three months into an unprecedented public health emergency, the White House has largely resisted calls for a coordinated plan to conduct the millions of tests experts say are needed to contain the virus. What federal officials outlined recently isn't even an official benchmark, and AP's analysis found that a majority of states are not yet meeting it.

With no specific guidelines, states are left to figure out what a successful testing program should be while they simultaneously try to reopen their shattered economies. If states

don't have robust testing, public health experts say they will be unable to detect outbreaks quickly enough to contain them, which could lead to more shutdowns.

In many states, testing has been limited to hospitalized patients, high-risk individuals and front-line workers. But most public health experts agree that containing the virus will require a massive expansion of testing that eventually includes millions of patients without symptoms, which is not happening now.

A testing blueprint released Monday by the Trump administration lacked any metrics state officials could use to make informed decisions. Instead, the document made clear that states are responsible for testing, saying the federal government is the "supplier of last resort."

The closest the White House has come to issuing a bench-

mark does not actually appear in the document. At a recent briefing, senior administration officials said the government would provide each state with enough tests, swabs and related materials to screen at least 2.6% of their populations in May and June. Those hit harder by the outbreak would be eligible for additional assistance.

It was unclear how the 2.6% figure was reached. When asked about it, officials with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services described it as 2% of state populations per month without explaining the discrepancy. Officials also did not respond to questions about whether the administration has a target for how many daily tests should be done nationwide or when it would issue more details.

A White House spokesman said Friday that the administration's testing threshold is only a suggestion and that states are

ultimately responsible for deciding how to reopen in a "safe and responsible manner." The administration says it is working to expand testing and has been highlighting plans first announced in March for additional testing sites at retail pharmacy chains.

Former health officials and experts were critical of the testing blueprint and said the 2.6% or 2% population metric was too vague and didn't take into account guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control on who should be tested.

Many experts already say the national testing rate falls short of what is needed to safely ease social distancing guidelines.

Researchers at Harvard have calculated that the U.S. needs to be testing roughly 500,000 people per day before considering easing restrictions this month. That's a nearly 150% increase from the recent daily tally of approximately 200,000 tests.

Many lockdowns ease, but others still struggling

Associated Press

ROME — From the United States to Europe to Asia, the easing of some coronavirus lockdowns brought millions out of their homes to enjoy the outdoors. Yet the global pandemic is still slicing through other nations, causing infections and deaths to march relentlessly higher.

On Sunday, India reported more than 2,600 infections, its biggest single-day jump, and new cases in Russia exceed 10,000 for the first time. The confirmed virus death toll in Britain was creeping up near that of Italy, the epicenter of Europe's outbreak, even though the U.K. population is younger than Italy's and Britain had more time than Italy to prepare before the pandemic hit.

There was also worrying

news from Afghanistan, where nearly a third tested positive in a random test of 500 people in Kabul, the capital city.

Health experts have warned that a second wave of infections could hit unless testing is expanded dramatically after lockdowns are eased. But there are enormous pressures to reopen economies, since the weeklong shutdown of businesses around the world has plunged the global economy into its deepest slump since the 1930s and has wiped out millions of jobs.

Nearly 1.7 million people visited Beijing parks on the first two days of the holiday, and Shanghai's main tourist spots welcomed more than 1 million visitors, according to Chinese media. Many spots limited daily visitors to 30% of capacity.

School year to stay digital for most DODEA students

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — All of the Defense Department's schools will close their doors for the remainder of the school year with the possible exception of those in South Korea, officials said Friday.

"In direct and close coordination with our senior military partners, the decision was made to keep school buildings closed to students for the remainder of the 2019/2020 school year and to maintain digital teaching and learning in all DODEA schools across the world," Department of Defense Education Activity Director Thomas Brady said in a letter to staff Friday.

In South Korea, where conditions have "improved considerably," schools could reopen "in the coming weeks" while DODEA and U.S. Forces Korea

assess the coronavirus risk, Brady said.

The agency's 162 schools overseas and in the U.S. will continue the online program put in place to ensure the continuity of education, Brady said.

In a separate announcement Friday, DODEA-Europe cited safety concerns and the short amount of time left in the school year as reasons for closing their schools.

The DODEA decision Friday came as some countries in Europe look to slowly reopen their schools, crediting social distancing and lockdown measures for reducing the virus's spread.

But pupils still need to make an effort to complete their assignments, officials said Friday.

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US, Taliban spokesmen clash over deal

BY J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The top U.S. military spokesman in Afghanistan and his counterpart in the Taliban traded words on Twitter in Saturday statements that appeared to reveal unwritten secret agreements between America and the militant group.

The U.S. military warned the Taliban that it must reduce attacks in line with an informal agreement to lower violence by 80% in a letter posted online by Col. Sonny Leggett.

“If the violence cannot be reduced — then yes, there will be responses,” Leggett said in the letter, addressed to Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid.

Mujahid called the U.S. statement “pointless and provocative” in a response later in the day.

U.S. officials have consistently said that continued violence against Afghan troops by the Taliban violates an agreement signed two months ago, despite such attacks not being expressly prohibited in the released text of the deal.

The deal says that if the Taliban stop attacking the U.S. and its allies, keep terrorists from operating in Afghanistan and hold intra-Afghan peace talks with the Kabul government, foreign forces will begin a phased withdrawal to leave the country in 14 months.

The deal also contains unwritten agreements, Leggett said on Twitter.

“During those long negotiations there were written and spoken commitments,” Leggett wrote. “We spoke of ALL sides reducing violence by as much as 80% to pave the way for peace talks.”

U.S. forces have begun drawing down from about 13,000 troops to 8,600 as part of the deal. But key parts of the agreement — prisoner exchanges and peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government — are long behind schedule.

Demands for lower violence in the country come after attacks on Afghan forces surged above “seasonal norms” after the deal was signed, according to a report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction released Friday.

Meanwhile, the Taliban accused the U.S. of violating the deal by continuing to bomb its fighters.

In response, the letter by Leggett said that U.S. forces have not conducted any offensive strikes since the deal’s signing, adding that operations to protect Afghan troops are allowed.

Saturday’s exchange was a rare revelation of details in the U.S. and Taliban deal, said Andrew Watkins, a senior Afghanistan analyst at International Crisis Group, a nonprofit think tank based in Brussels.

“The fact the U.S. is bringing this out into the public now, two months later, suggests the U.S. may feel things aren’t working,” Watkins told Stars and Stripes on Sunday.

ISIS extremists step up as Iraq, Syria grapple with virus

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — The man wearing an explosive vest emerged from a car and calmly marched toward the gates of the intelligence building in Iraq’s northern city of Kirkuk. When he ignored their shouts to halt, guards opened fire and he blew himself up, wounding three security personnel in the first week of Ramadan.

Days later, a three-pronged coordinated attack killed 10 Iraqi militia fighters in the northern province of Salahaddin — the deadliest and most complex operation in many months.

The assaults are the latest in a resurgence of attacks by Islamic State in northern Iraq. The first was a brazen suicide mission not seen in months. The second was among the most complex attacks since the group’s defeat in 2017. In neighboring Syria, ISIS attacks on security forces, oil fields and civilian sites have also intensified.

The renewed mayhem is a sign that the militant group is taking advantage of govern-

ments absorbed in tackling the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing slide into economic chaos. The virus is compounding longtime concerns among security and U.N. experts that the group would stage a comeback after its “caliphate,” which once encompassed a third of Iraq and Syria, was brought down last year.

In Iraq, militants also exploited security gaps at a time of an ongoing territorial dispute and a U.S. troop drawdown.

“It’s a real threat,” said Qubad Talabani, deputy prime minister of the northern Kurdish region of Iraq. “They are mobilizing and killing us in the north, and they will start hitting Baghdad soon.”

He said that ISIS was benefiting from a “gap” between Kurdish forces and federal armed forces caused by political infighting.

Intelligence reports said that the number of ISIS fighters in Iraq is believed to be 2,500-3,000.

In northeast Syria, Kurdish-dominated police have become a more visible target for ISIS as they patrol the streets to imple-

ment anti-virus measures, said Mervan Qamishlo, a spokesman for U.S.-allied Kurdish-led forces.

ISIS fighters in late March launched a campaign of attacks in government-held parts of Syria, from the central province of Homs all the way to Deir el-Zour to the east, bordering Iraq.

Some 500 fighters, including some who had escaped from prison, recently slipped from Syria into Iraq, helping fuel the surge in violence there, Iraqi intelligence officials said.

ISIS is shifting from local intimidation to more complex attacks, three Iraqi military officials and experts said. Operations previously focused on assassinations of local officials and less sophisticated attacks. The group is now carrying out more IED attacks, shootings and ambushes of police and military. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

Multiple factors help the militants. The number of Iraqi military personnel on duty has dropped 50% because of virus

prevention measures, the military officials said.

Also, territorial disputes between Baghdad and authorities from the northern Kurdish autonomy zone have left parts of three provinces without law enforcement. The rugged landscape is difficult to police.

The uptick also coincides with a pullout of U.S.-led coalition forces from bases in western Iraq, Nineveh and Kirkuk provinces in line with a drawdown conceived in December.

“Before the emergence of the virus and before the American withdrawal, the operations were negligible, numbering only one operation per week,” said a senior intelligence official. Now, he said, security forces are seeing an average of 20 operations a month. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief the media.

Coalition spokesman Col. Myles B. Caggins III said that ISIS attacks were increasing in reaction to operations against its hideouts in the mountains and rural areas of north-central Iraq.

5.4-magnitude quake hits Puerto Rico

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — A 5.4-magnitude earthquake struck near southern Puerto Rico on Saturday, briefly knocking out power and forcing the relocation of at least 50 families on an island where some people still remain in shelters from previous quakes earlier this year. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake hit at a depth of 5.6 miles near the city of Ponce and the towns of Guanica and

Guayanilla, where hundreds of homes were destroyed by a quake in early January that killed one person and caused millions of dollars in damage.

The earthquake cracked walls, flung goods off supermarket shelves and caused a second-story balcony to crash in the southern coastal city of Ponce. It occurred amid a two-month lockdown and just hours after the government announced the biggest spike in COVID-19 cases since the first one was reported in March in the U.S. territory.

“This is a crisis on top of another crisis,” said Health Secretary Lorenzo Gonzalez.

Most of the damage was reported in Ponce, where officials were still going neighborhood by neighborhood to assess damage as rescue crews fanned out across the region.

“It’s time to cry if you have to cry,” said Ponce Mayor Maria Melendez. “We’re human beings.”

Gov. Wanda Vazquez said the 50 families that have to be relocated will not be placed in shelters given concerns about

the coronavirus contagion. She also urged Puerto Ricans to stay home even if they want to drive to the island’s southern region to help those affected and distribute food as they did earlier this year following the 6.4-magnitude earthquake.

“We’re up against an emergency situation, but we can’t forget that the most lethal one we have in our hands is COVID-19,” she said as she urged people to wear masks and other protective equipment even if they have to evacuate damaged buildings.

12-year-old recovers from near-death experience against fatal coronavirus

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — As her desperately sick daughter was being airlifted to a hospital, Jennifer Daly was thinking about all the parts of life that still lay ahead for her 12-year-old and whether she’d ever experience them: Would she get to fall in love? Would she get the chance to get married and have her own children?

Driving across the causeway that separates the family’s home north of Lake Pontchartrain from the New Orleans hospital where their daughter was taken — with what was later determined to be a coronavirus infection — she was forced to imagine a life without her Juliet.

“She’s the sweetest girl. She’s the sweetest girl in the whole world. And she does not deserve this. And I was praying to God ... just please, please help, please help me,” said Jennifer, speaking from the family’s Covington home Thursday, with her husband Sean and their now-recovered daughter.

As Juliet and her 5-year-old brother spar with each other using pool noodles, it’s hard to imagine that just earlier last month Juliet was fighting for her life. At one point she had a heart attack and doctors had to

perform CPR for two minutes before she came back.

“I died and came back,” Juliet said.

Her coronavirus journey didn’t start with many of the symptoms that have affected adults — breathing problems, for example. She had stomach pain and vomiting, and her mother, who’s a radiologist, thought maybe it was appendicitis or some type of stomach problem. But Juliet’s lips were also turning blue and her limbs were cold.

Juliet quickly ended up in the emergency room of the local hospital. There, she had a heart attack, underwent CPR, and was eventually airlifted to Ochsner Medical Center. Dr. Jake Kleinmahon was one of the doctors who was there to meet her and care for her over the next 10 days.

“Juliet came in as one of the sickest children we’ve taken care of with COVID-19,” said Kleinmahon. The top chamber of her heart was not working correctly with the bottom chamber, and she was developing “multisystem organ failure,” he said.

Kleinmahon said children with coronavirus infections often have different symptoms than adults, such as the ab-

dominal problems Juliet had, or rashes in other cases. He said many children also have another virus besides the coronavirus and that was the case with Juliet.

Juliet was on a ventilator for four days, during which she was sedated and then was eventually able to breathe on her own. She was discharged April 15. The doctor said her heart function is now completely normal. Although she likely has a little trauma to her heart that should decrease over time, he expects she’ll have a “totally normal life.”

Jennifer said she and her husband hadn’t known anyone who’d even been infected with coronavirus until their daughter became so drastically ill. If they hadn’t gotten her to the hospital in time, they don’t know if she’d be alive today. She’s glad Juliet doesn’t remember those four days on a ventilator — days Jennifer will never forget.

“All she remembers is daddy telling her she’s going to go to sleep. They’re going to put a tube down your throat. You’re gonna go on a helicopter ride. You’re gonna wake up in a new hospital and mommy will be there,” said Jennifer. “Well, that’s what happened.”

Alaska airport reopens after report of false bomb threat

Alaska Dispatch News, Anchorage

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — A report of a bomb on a cargo flight bound for Asia prompted its diversion to Anchorage on Saturday morning, briefly closing Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport.

No explosive device was found on the plane, FBI Special Agent Steve Forrest with the Anchorage Field Office said in a statement.

The China Air cargo plane was diverted to Anchorage’s international airport after taking off from Seattle. It was headed to Taipei, Taiwan, Forrest said.

The threat was called into the Port of Seattle, Forrest said, and investigators are still trying to discern the source of the threat.

“The FBI does not believe there is any continuing threat to our community as a result of this incident,” Forrest said.

The airport had briefly closed to inbound flights during the incident.

The plane was “searched in a secure, remote section of the airport,” according to a Facebook post from the airport.

Israel's high court hears petitions against Netanyahu

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israel's high court began hearing petitions on Sunday against Benjamin Netanyahu forming a government while facing criminal indictments.

The proceedings, held by an exceptionally large panel of 11 justices and in a rare instance also broadcast live, are focusing on the issue of whether a politician can form a government while under indictment — something the Israeli legal code does not explicitly prohibit.

If the court voids Netanyahu's ability to serve as prime minister, Israel could be plunged into political chaos, and it would likely trigger the country's fourth consecutive election in

just over 12 months.

In an exceptional move, Sunday's hearing was broadcast live on the high court's website while most of the country remains under coronavirus movement restrictions. The judges, attorneys and clerks wore face masks, and plastic barriers separated each of the 11 justices on the bench.

Netanyahu was indicted earlier this year on charges of accepting bribes, fraud and breach of trust. He has denied any wrongdoing. His trial was postponed due to restrictions his hand-picked interim justice minister placed on the courts after the coronavirus crisis erupted and is scheduled to commence later this month.

Last week, Israel's attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, said in an opinion to the court that while Netanyahu's indictments "raise significant problems," there was no legal basis for barring him from serving while facing criminal charges.

Israeli law mandates that Cabinet ministers and mayors resign if indicted, but prime ministers are not specifically required to step down. In January, the Supreme Court declined to rule on whether Netanyahu could form a government under indictment, saying the matter remained "theoretical" ahead of March's elections.

5 security forces killed in rebel fight in Kashmir

Associated Press

SRINAGAR, India — Five Indian security personnel and two militants were killed in a major spike in fighting in disputed Kashmir when the army and police stormed a house where rebels were holding hostages, officials said.

A five-member counterinsurgency team entered the house in northwestern Handwara area on late Saturday and "successfully extricated the civilians," an Indian army statement said.

The security forces came under heavy gunfire from militants and in the ensuing firefight, two militants and all the team members died, it said.

The statement did not specify how many civilians were rescued. No militant group has immediately commented and there was no independent confirmation of the hostage-taking.

A police officer said an army colonel and a major along with a police officer and two other soldiers tried to storm the hideout when they were gunned down by the militants. The officer spoke on condition of anonymity in keeping with department policy.

The officer said the reinforcement of special forces was called in and they shot dead the two militants but two others likely escaped.

India has stepped up its counterinsurgency operations across Kashmir in recent months despite a lockdown to combat the coronavirus. Militants fighting Indian rule have not ceased their attacks on government forces and alleged informants either.

Rebel groups in Indian-held Kashmir demand that the territory be united either under Pakistani rule or as an independent country. India accuses Pakistan of arming and training anti-India rebels. Pakistan denies this, saying it offers only moral and diplomatic support to the militants

Trump replaces HHS watchdog who found 'severe shortages' at hospitals

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump moved to replace the top watchdog at the Department of Health and Human Services after her office released a report on the shortages in testing and personal protective gear at hospitals during the coronavirus pandemic.

In a Friday night announcement, the White House nominated a permanent inspector general to take the reins from Christi Grimm, the principal deputy inspector general who has run the office since January.

The White House nominated Jason Weida, an assistant United States attorney in Boston, as permanent inspector general. The announcement said Weida was chosen because he has overseen "numerous complex investigations in health care and other sectors." He must be

confirmed by the Senate.

Grimm's removal follows a purge of high-profile federal officials and inspectors general whose work has been critical of the president. Inspectors general at large agencies serve at the pleasure of the president, but they are considered independent monitors for waste, fraud and abuse.

Trump laced into Grimm at a news conference in April, after her staff report found "severe shortages" of testing kits, delays in getting coronavirus results and "widespread shortages" of masks and other equipment at U.S. hospitals.

The president demanded to know who wrote the report, calling the findings "wrong." He then accused reporters of having withheld that Grimm had worked in the Obama administration.

"Where did he come from, the inspector general? What's

his name? No, what's his name? What's his name?" Trump responded on April 6, when asked about the report, which he said was politically biased. He then attacked Grimm on Twitter, writing, "Why didn't the I.G., who spent 8 years with the Obama Administration (Did she Report on the failed H1N1 Swine Flu debacle where 17,000 people died?), want to talk to the Admirals, Generals, V.P. & others in charge, before doing her report."

Grimm is a career investigator and auditor who joined the inspector general's office, one of the federal government's largest, in 1999 when Bill Clinton was president. She has served in Republican and Democratic administrations and is not a political appointee.

She took over the inspector general's office in an acting capacity in January from another acting official, who retired.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Corrections officer slips inmate nude pics

SC PELZER — A South Carolina correctional officer at the Perry Correctional Institution was accused of sharing nude photographs and contraband food items with an inmate, authorities said.

Kashaila Danei Hawthorne, 28, was charged with providing contraband to a prisoner and misconduct in office, news outlets reported.

The release said Hawthorne gave the inmate nude photographs on a cellphone and prohibited food items on or between Jan. 1 and April 29. An arrest warrant said that Hawthorne also kissed the inmate several times.

Court rules officer's traffic stop not justified

NC RALEIGH — A state trooper's decision to stop a driver who flashed an obscene hand gesture wasn't justified, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled, overturning lower court decisions.

Trooper Paul Stevens and a local police officer had stopped to help a stranded motorist after a January 2017 snowstorm when Stevens noticed what turned out to be Shawn Patrick Ellis in another vehicle.

Ellis' back-and-forth waving motion with his hand outside the window turned into a pumping up-and-down motion with his middle finger, court documents say.

Associate Justice Robin Hudson returned the case to the trial court.

Man injured in shootout flees hospital ER

WA PARKLAND — A man wounded in a gang-related shootout escaped

from a hospital during a "commotion" in an emergency room, police said.

"A group of people showed up; there was a commotion," at St. Joseph Medical Center "and he took off," Pierce County sheriff's spokesman Ed Troyer said.

Investigators believe at least two suspected gang members were involved in the shooting, and the man who fled the emergency room had suffered multiple gunshot wounds, The News Tribune reported. The other person was not injured, authorities said.

Residents steal 44 guns from neighboring state

GA THOMASVILLE — A total of 11 Georgia residents were arrested for stealing dozens of guns from a store in Florida's capital city. They include seven men charged as adults plus four charged as juveniles.

Police are looking for two more suspects, Thomasville police Lt. Toby Knifer told the Thomasville Times-Enterprise.

Gavin Ivey of Whigham was arrested in Thomas County and taken to Albany, where he was charged with murder in a weekend shooting. Knifer said the investigation shows Ivey bought one of the 44 guns stolen from Kevin's Guns and Sporting Goods in Tallahassee on April 22.

Couple charged for coughs, COVID-19 claim

KS HESSTON — A Kansas couple shopping at Walmart who authorities said repeatedly coughed on people and claimed the man had contracted the coronavirus were charged with felonies.

Another customer used her

cellphone to record Hazel Hamrick, 29, and Ernest Williams, 47, creating the disturbance at a Walmart in Newton.

Hamrick was charged with two counts of criminal threat, while Williams was charged with two counts of aiding and abetting criminal threat. They also both face a misdemeanor charge of disorderly conduct.

Non-native lizard found in state on Earth Day

RI PROVIDENCE — The smallest state has some big news, if you're a biologist: its first lizard. A five-lined skink discovered on Earth Day in Rhode Island is not native to the state, meaning there might be a population here, excited scientists said.

A scientist found the juvenile lizard in South County and contacted Nancy Karraker, a herpetologist at the University of Rhode Island, who confirmed it was a five-lined skink, WJAR-TV reported.

The skinks previously have been found to the west of the Connecticut River, scientists said.

Historic emigrant landmark vandalized

ID ALMO — Vandals spray-painted graffiti on an historic Idaho landmark in City of Rocks National Reserve in what officials say is the worst case of vandalism in the park's history.

National Reserve superintendent Wallace Keck said that he believes two to six people were involved in the vandalism at Camp Rock, one of the formations at City of Rocks near Almo in south central Idaho.

Camp Rock was a common camping site in the 1840s and '50s for tens of thousands of emigrants following the Cali-

fornia Trail. Many signed their names in axle grease on the site's granite boulders, park officials said.

Box truck found in lake may be from cold case

PA FLEETVILLE — A box truck found at the bottom of a northeastern Pennsylvania lake is believed to have been used in a crime spree more than a decade ago, authorities said.

A man on a fishing boat noticed what appeared to be a vehicle in the Benton Township lake in Lackawanna State Park in Lackawanna County.

The (Scranton) Times-Tribune reported that police suspect the truck is the same one stolen from an electrical contractor in Scott Township. Chief Jared Ganz said investigators believe the truck was then used to steal an ATM from a convenience store.

Removal of grounded ship could be delayed

NC NAGS HEAD — The coronavirus pandemic could delay the removal of a 72-foot long fishing vessel that has been grounded for weeks on a beach on North Carolina's Outer Banks.

The scallop harvesting boat is considered a safety hazard as curious people climb aboard its rusting hull.

The Virginian-Pilot reported that removing the abandoned boat could cost more than \$60,000.

The boat's owner is responsible for its removal. But the owner lives in Texas. And stay-at-home orders have limited travel between states.

The ship ran aground during a storm on March 1.

From wire reports

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NFL briefs

QB Dalton signs with Cowboys

Associated Press

Andy Dalton is coming home to Texas as Dak Prescott's back-up with the Dallas Cowboys.

Dalton and the Cowboys agreed Saturday to a one-year deal that guarantees the former Cincinnati starter \$3 million and could be worth up to \$7 million. The agreement was first reported by ESPN.

The Cowboys reached a deal with Dalton two days after he was released by the Bengals.

The Cowboys have relied on the untested Cooper Rush behind Prescott the past two seasons. The 32-year-old Dalton marks their biggest investment in a veteran backup since Prescott replaced the injured Tony Romo as a rookie in 2016.

Dalton started 133 games for the Bengals and led the franchise's best stretch of playoff appearances — five straight from 2011-15.

Dalton's 70-61-2 record as a starter is second best by a Bengals quarterback with at least 10 starts, trailing Virgil Carter. Dalton holds the club records for touchdown passes (204) and completions (2,757).

Bears decline option on Trubisky's contract

The Chicago Bears have declined their fifth-year option for quarterback Mitchell Trubisky for the 2021 season, a person familiar with the situation said Saturday.

The move is hardly a surprise considering the way Trubisky struggled in his third season since the Bears drafted him with the No. 2 overall pick. His yards (3,138), completion rate (63.2%), touchdowns (17) and rating (83) all dropped from the previous year.

The Bears acquired 2018 Super Bowl MVP Nick Foles from Jacksonville in March and plan to hold an open competition for the starting job.

Checkered flag near for pro drivers in virtual racing boom

Associated Press

DOVER, Del. — The moment in the virtual sun has arrived for simulated racing and the thousands of gamers who always wanted to race like Dale Earnhardt Jr. or Jeff Gordon at NASCAR tracks from Dover to Daytona.

Sports fans discovered over the last few weeks on national TV a not-so-hidden secret in the racing community: the NASCAR champs and IndyCar drivers wanted to compete like their fans — to hook up a simulator rig, grab a wheel and go head-to-virtual head with the best in the field without risking a real slam into the wall at more than 200 mph.

The races have set viewing records, filling the yawning gaps in sports programming and helping make iRacing, headquartered in Chelmsford, Mass., a breakout company during the coronavirus pandemic.

"I don't think anyone wants a pandemic as the reason why all of a sudden you're extremely successful," iRacing executive Steve Myers said. "The only reason why we've been able to do this is because we've put 16 years worth of work and time into making this platform capable of doing this. It's been massively successful for us to put these races on."

The real hope is the iRacing boon can be sustained without Cup drivers to prop up the series.

With NASCAR set to return May 17, the iRacing Pro Invitational Series will likely go away. The NASCAR-backed iRacing Series, featuring the best sim racers in the field, will continue to run on digital platforms; six races will air on NBCSN during the series' playoffs. The last race on Fox in the Pro series is scheduled for May 9.

NASCAR's online competition has been the clear winner among other sports — such as tennis — that have dabbled in virtual gaming during the shutdown.

At Dover International Speedway, the finishing touches should have been applied last week, the sponsor signage added, everything spruced up for what would have been a NASCAR Cup Series race Sunday.

Instead, NASCAR drivers will spend the day on those simulators at virtual Dover. Blake Shelton is the grand marshal for the track that has been in the sim company's bank for years, and David Hasselhoff was to sing the national anthem. Hendrick Motorsports driver William Byron is the favorite for the fourth straight race. There's no chance of rain.

The real stars of iRacing are the 3D car artists, software programmers and engineers — in NASCAR parlance, the team back at the shop.

They visit tracks with laser scanners on tripods to capture in perfect detail every bump, curve, crack and painted line in a digital point cloud. The crew takes up to 10,000 pictures of, not just the track, but any grandstands, bridges

or other structures in the distance connected to the property. It can take four to six months from first photos to simulated finish.

"We've always had a commitment to authenticity at all costs," said Greg Hill, who leads the art and production teams at iRacing. "That's a lot of hard work. In some ways, it puts you in a niche, but as we've found with this COVID-19, having had that commitment to authenticity has led to outfits like NASCAR and all these drivers going to us and bringing us this attention."

The numbers — even some real-life bumps, like Kyle Larson's racial slur that cost him his NASCAR ride — bear it out: iRacing, formed in 2004, has added roughly 70,000 subscribers (at up to \$55 per year) over the course of the pandemic and become a ratings hit on the weekends. Fox Sports says five pro events — keyed by the star power of today's top Cup drivers and retired greats — have averaged 1.135 million viewers, topped by 1.53 million for the Texas virtual race.

The virtual series, which skews toward the coveted 18-to-34 demographic, passed 100,000 active customers in January and hit 170,000 this week.

"Our theory was always, if the racers like it and they find it useful, then the rest of the general public that enjoys this sport is going to enjoy it as well," Myers said.

Gaming, of course, and social platforms have been a major accessory during the pandemic. Games like Fortnite, once a nuisance to parents, are now de-facto babysitters. Twitch recently reported a 17% increase in hours watched compared to the previous quarter. YouTube Gaming and Facebook Gaming also saw spikes in streaming traffic in the first quarter of this year.

TimTheTatman, DrLupo and Ninja (ask your kids) are this generation's Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods.

Simulated drivers haven't seen their Q score peak just yet — perhaps they should try dodging turtle shells or dodge a thunderbolt — but the question is often raised: Is iRacing a video game?

"People get so hung up on the term simulation vs. a video game," Myers said with a laugh. "I like to say, we are what you want it to be."

Whatever the genre, it's entertainment for fans across the globe to race like their favorite drivers at tracks they may never visit or have always wanted to tame.

The checkered flag is nearing for the weekly national exposure that put iRacing on the real world sports map.

"I'm not joking when I say that the only day off we've had since this started was Easter," Myers said. "It probably won't register what we've done and accomplished until we get a couple of weeks down the road here, NASCAR is back on TV and we can sit back and be fans again."

Virus testing remains big hurdle for sports

Associated Press

MIAMI — Politicians, players and owners are trying to figure out a way to get baseball, basketball and hockey going again, not only for economic reasons but as a welcome diversion for a social distancing nation facing uncertain times.

But to do so would require commandeering thousands of test kits each week for millionaire pro athletes and support staff, something many view as unseemly, especially when ordinary Americans are waiting in line.

Leagues know it would be a terrible look for them to jump the testing line. Acutely aware of the potential backlash, commissioners and owners are saying that, until the public has more access to testing, they don't want to secure tests for players. The NBA even told teams in a memo Thursday that it would be inappropriate to test asymptomatic players and coaches for now — but the league does expect to have testing available when it's time to return to practices and games.

The NBA plans to allow teams to reopen some facilities May 8, but only for voluntary workouts and in cities where local governments allow. And there is no timetable yet for a return to practices and games, in large part because the testing issue remains unsolved.

"We would have to ensure that testing is widely available and front-line health care workers have access before we begin talking about regular testing in the context of professional sports," NBA spokesman Mike Bass said.

The economic impact of sports not happening is beyond enormous: From athletes — NBA players alone stand to lose roughly \$850 million in salaries if this season doesn't resume — to the thousands of part-time workers around stadiums. Broadcasters have lost millions and furloughed thousands of workers, and sports books saw nearly 80% less action this March than they did in March 2019. All of the above reduces tax revenue to local governments.

President Donald Trump wants sports back for both economic and morale reasons, knowing that once games start getting played again, Americans will have something to cheer for — whether fans are in the stands or not.

Harvard researchers say the U.S. should be testing at least a half-million people daily, while the White House estimates about 200,000 tests are being administered each day.

Some teams were sharply criticized for getting their players tested when the pandemic was beginning to take hold in March. The leagues want to avoid a similar blowback.

"The threshold question is the health question. That's where we're spending the most time," MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred said. "The ones that are the most worrisome are the ones that are beyond their control."

According to Major League Baseball, 3,000 kits would need to be available for players, staff, broadcasters and others for every round of testing to

get its season going and keep it going. Even if the NHL and NBA return with just 16 post-season teams on the ice and courts, those leagues would likely require tests for a minimum of 1,000 players and staff. And there's no telling how often the tests would be required to be administered.

With tests still in short supply, that's not a great look.

"We know that 50% of people are asymptomatic and we need to catch them before they spread the disease," Dr. Vincent DeGennaro, the CEO of rapid-test maker Abacus Pharma International, told Miami television station WFOR. "And by testing everybody and having those tests here, we should be able to start to get back to some semblance of normalcy and talk about opening up."

Some health care officials have said an equally problematic issue is a shortfall of personal protective equipment — masks, gowns, gloves and the like — that are needed by the people tasked with administering the tests.

Despite worries, Miocic welcomes UFC's return

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Heavyweight champion Stipe Miocic welcomes UFC's plans to reopen the octagon. The fighter — and firefighter — does have some concerns, though.

After scrapping an idea to hold fights on tribal land in California and canceling or postponing several events since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, UFC will return to competition May 9 in Jacksonville, Fla.

UFC President Dana White recently announced UFC 249 will be held without fans at VyStar Veterans Memorial Arena. Two additional fight cards are scheduled for May 13 and May 16 at the venue.

Miocic said his only reservation about the sport's reopening is related to health reasons.

"As long as everyone is safe, I hope it works out," said Miocic, who has continued to work as a firefighter and paramedic during the outbreak. "And not just the fighters, I worry about everyone's safety. It takes one person to (infect) three people, and

how fast it can spread, it's crazy."

Miocic recaptured his title belt in August by pummeling Daniel Cormier at UFC 241. On Thursday, the affable 37-year-old said his recovery following surgery to repair a torn retina continues to go well — "I have some spots, but definitely I can see" — and that he misses his training routine while awaiting a return to normalcy.

Until then, Miocic has been working shifts for the Valley View (Ohio) Fire Department. Personal safety is always a priority in his "other" job, and Miocic said he and his co-workers have remained vigilant during these unprecedented times.

"I have a job to do, and when I go to the station, I make sure I stay clean," he said by phone from his home in North Royalton, Ohio, "We're smart. We're clean. We're masked. We wear goggles, gloves and gowns when he have to. It's our routine, so I'm not really worried about that."

Miocic has teamed with Modelo beer to raise funds for personal protection equipment for first responders during the pandemic.

Miocic also has been working out, but not like he normally would while training for a fight. A third matchup with Cormier, who knocked him out in the first round in 2018, appears likely but isn't official.

He joked that most of his cardio work these days comes from chasing his young daughter around the house.

Already proven to be adept with his hands, Miocic has filled idle time with home projects. He's surprised himself with a knack for wallpapering.

Removal, that is.

"I'm good at bringing things down," he joked.

A die-hard Cleveland sports fan, Miocic was pleased with the Browns' selections in last week's NFL draft.

"I thought we did really well actually," said Miocic, who trained last year with Browns star defensive end Myles Garrett. "We were smart. I think we got a few of the pieces that we need. I think we're doing the right things."