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NATO hesitant to move into Sea of Azov

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Ukraine's president urged NATO on Thursday to send warships into the Sea of Azov, as President Donald Trump announced he was canceling a planned meeting with Russia's president over the seizure of Ukrainian ships and crews this week.

President Petro Poroshenko, in an interview with the German Bild newspaper, said "we hope that in NATO, states are now ready to relocate naval ships to the Sea of Azov in order to assist Ukraine and provide security."

So far the U.S.-led alliance has shown no interest in forcing its way into waters under Russian control.

However, Trump announced a tweet that he would no longer meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which had been set for noon Dec. 1 at the Group of 20 summit in Argentina.

On Sunday, Russian military forces fired upon three Ukrainian vessels attempting to pass through the Kerch Strait — a narrow passage that connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Moscow seized the ships and

captured about 23 sailors, marking a major escalation between two countries that have been at odds since Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

Poroshenko, who declared martial law in parts of his country earlier this week, also said he is worried that Moscow is planning a new ground offensive to annex more Ukrainian territory.

On Sunday, Russian military forces fired upon three Ukrainian vessels attempting to pass through the Kerch Strait — a narrow passage that connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Moscow seized the ships and captured about 23 sailors, marking a major escalation between two countries that have been at odds since Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

Moscow blamed Ukraine for the clash, saying that the ships failed to provide proper transit notifications, which Kiev and Western states have dismissed as false. So far, the West has offered condemnations of Russia's attack on Ukrainian ships but made no move to sanction Russia.

It is unlikely NATO would agree to send ships into the Sea of Azov — a body of water defined in a bilateral agreement

as internal to Russia and Ukraine, though some maritime law experts theorize that a small portion of the central sea could be considered international waters.

Russia also controls access to Azov at the Kerch Strait, which means sending warships in a show of force could risk a dangerous escalation. There are also operational limits on what allied ships could be deployed to the Sea of Azov, which in many places is too shallow for larger vessels, such as destroyers, to operate.

However, the U.S. and NATO navies regularly patrol the Black Sea and could opt to increase those missions. Commercial aviation trackers also show that U.S. surveillance aircraft are a regular presence in the Black Sea and around the Kerch Strait.

On Tuesday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other NATO foreign ministers will gather in Brussels for high-level talks in which they are expected to discuss the clash at sea. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said the alliance was still assessing how to respond.

Poroshenko said the West should show solidarity with Ukraine if it wants to contain Russia under Putin.

Sextortion ring targets hundreds of servicemembers

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Five people were arrested and five prisoners served summonses Wednesday for their roles in a sextortion ring in which inmates from South Carolina used online dating sites and social media forums to target hundreds of servicemembers and coerce more than \$500,000 from them, Naval Criminal Investigative Services announced.

NCIS spokesman Jeff Houston said the sextortion ring was based out of multiple prison facilities in South Carolina, but he would not identify which ones.

The arrests and summonses for money laundering, extortion and wire fraud were part of the first phase of Operation Surprise Party, which was initiated in January 2017, according to a NCIS news release. The Defense Criminal Investigative Service, Army Criminal Investigation Command and Air Force Office of Special Investiga-

tions participated in the NCIS investigation, along with other local and federal law enforcement agencies.

NCIS officials did not identify the people charged in the ring.

With help from people outside of prison, the inmates found and targeted servicemembers online by engaging in fictional romantic relationships and then extorting them for money, according to NCIS.

Posing as women on the dating and social media sites, the inmates exchanged photos with the servicemembers and then pretended to be the woman's father, saying she was underage. They would also pretend to be law enforcement or authority figures who would ask for money in exchange for not pressing charges, according to the NCIS news release.

"Military members would then pay, fearful they might lose their careers over possessing what they were being led to believe was child pornography," the release stated.

Houston said NCIS "cannot speak to why the servicemembers were targeted."

The ring extorted more than \$560,000 from 442 servicemembers across the U.S. in the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps, according to the news release.

"This despicable targeting of our brave servicemembers will never be tolerated," Director Andrew Traver of Naval Criminal Investigative Service said in a prepared statement. "We will not allow criminal networks to degrade the readiness of our military force."

More than 250 other people are also being investigated for involvement in the ring and could face charges.

Servicemembers who believe they are being targeted by sextortion or see suspicious activity online are asked to contact their local Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Army Criminal Investigation Command or Air Force Office of Special Investigations office.

US servicemembers killed by a roadside bomb blast identified

BY CHAD GARLAND AND
PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Described as a daredevil who was driven to succeed in the Air Force and the toughest person his family knew, Staff Sgt. Dylan Elchin was planning to marry his fiancée when he returned home from Afghanistan in January.

"They had their whole life ahead of them," Dawna Duez, Elchin's mother, said Wednesday, fighting back tears in a phone interview from her home in Pennsylvania.

Her son, a 25-year-old combat controller assigned to the 26th Special Tactics Squadron at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., was one of three American servicemembers killed Tuesday in a roadside bomb blast that struck a convoy of U.S. and Afghan forces en route to battle Taliban fighters in southeastern Afghanistan.

Green Berets Capt. Andrew Patrick Ross, 29, a newlywed from Lexington, Va., and Sgt. 1st Class Eric Michael Emond, 39, father of three young girls from Brush Prairie, Wash., also died after being wounded in the attack in Ghazni province, about 100 miles south of Kabul. Both were assigned to 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Three more troops and a contractor were wounded in the attack, which was the deadliest this year for Americans. The wounded were evacuated and were being treated, officials said.

Ross had served more than seven years in the Army and was on his second tour, said Lt. Col. Loren Bymer, Army Special Operations Command spokesman. He was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart, Meritorious Service Medal and the Combat Infantry Badge.

James Hasson, an Afghani-

stan veteran and lawyer, prepared for Ranger school with Ross and went through the grueling course in the same company with him, he said on Twitter.

"He was born to be a soldier and motivated the rest of us when we wanted to quit," Hasson wrote.

Ross' wife, Felicia, called him "the most perfect man, love of my life," in a Facebook post.

"You made me the happiest woman in the world and I'm so glad to have known you," she wrote. Later she posted a video of their February 2018 wedding. "Looking back on the most perfect day on some really tough ones!"

A GI who helped vets

Emond, a Boston native, had served more than two decades in the Army and Marine Corps and was on his seventh overseas tour when he died. He was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart and Meritorious Service Medal.

The husband and father of three was remembered by friends as lighthearted, smart and tough with a strong desire to help others. He had helped found the Massachusetts Fallen Heroes, which supports veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and Gold Star Families from his home state.

"He was the bedrock of the organization," Dan Magoon, the foundation's executive director and an Army veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, told WCVB news in Boston.

The nonprofit raised funds to build the Beacon of Honor, a memorial in Boston's Seaport Common recognizing the sacrifice of the state's servicemembers who have died in America's wars since 2001. Glass panels list the names of 272 fallen troops in chronological order of their deaths.

Both Ross and Emond were invaluable leaders, Col. Nathan Prussian, 3rd Group commander, said in a prepared statement.

An elite airman

Elchin, who was on his first deployment, was the first airman killed in the country this year. His awards and decorations include a Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart, Army Commendation Medal with Valor, Air Force Commendation Medal and Air Force Combat Action Medal.

"He's the whole family's hero," said his brother, Aaron. "He was the strongest man I've ever known, not just physically, but mentally. And the part that hurts me the most is that I'll never know what he could have become."

The Taliban quickly claimed credit for the deadly attack, saying it was targeted at the foreign invaders. The group has waged a 17-year insurgency and, despite a short-lived holiday cease-fire this summer, continues to mount attacks while U.S. and Afghan officials have stepped-up efforts to negotiate peace.

Relatively few of the 15,000 American troops in Afghanistan go into combat or serve near the front lines, but special operations troops are among those who regularly accompany their Afghan counterparts into battle.

The Special Operations Warrior Foundation estimates special operations forces and their support personnel make up about 5 percent of the military but half of the casualties, including those who die or are wounded in training and line of duty incidents.

Last year, the charity began supporting 90 children of fallen troops, the most since their founding in 1980, said Aly Olson, the organization's business relations manager.

Taliban attack in Kabul kills 6

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — A brazen Taliban attack that targeted the Kabul offices of a British security company killed five of its staffers, including a British national, the company said Thursday. Afghan authorities said a sixth person was also killed in the assault.

Charlie Burbridge, the managing director of G4S Risk Management Group, said 32 employees of the company were also wounded in the attack, five of them seriously.

"Our thoughts at this difficult time are with the loved ones of those who have died and been injured, and our brave team in Afghanistan who have lost colleagues and friends," Burbridge said in a statement.

The attack started with a suicide bomber who rammed his explosive-packed truck into the gate of the G4S compound in eastern Kabul on Wednesday evening, followed by an hours-long gunbattle with insurgents armed with grenades and automatic rifles who stormed the compound building.

The Taliban, who claimed responsibility for the attack, said it was in retaliation for a U.S. airstrike in southern Helmand province hours earlier that killed 30 people, many of them civilians.

Afghan officials revised the initial number of 10 reported killed in the Kabul assault to six. The public health ministry spokesman, Wahid Majroh, said four attackers had also died, leading to the confusion, but he did not identify any of the casualties.

The suicide blast left a giant crater in its wake and blew out windows in nearby buildings.

Jan Agha, a police officer at the site of the explosion Thursday, recalled the gunbattle that lasted into the night as ambulances ferried the victims to hospitals amid the chaos.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the insurgents had killed 10 foreigners but the Taliban often exaggerate their claims. All the attackers died in the assault.

2 Navy ships steam through Taiwan Strait

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

A pair of Navy ships sailed through the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, just days before President Donald Trump is expected to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping during the Group of 20 summit in Argentina.

The destroyer USS Stockdale and the replenishment oiler USNS Pecos made a "routine" transit that "demonstrates the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," Pacific Fleet spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Tim Gorman said in a statement.

"The U.S. Navy will continue to fly, sail and operate anywhere international law allows," he added.

China objects to Navy warships sailing the roughly 100-mile-wide strait that

divides the Chinese mainland from self-ruled Taiwan, which split from China in 1949 at the end of a civil war.

China regards Taiwan as a renegade province that must one day be reunified with the mainland.

Navy ships most recently passed through the strait in July and October. After the October transit of a destroyer and a cruiser, the state-run China Daily newspaper criticized the Trump administration for "playing a high-stakes game backing Taipei."

China has been flexing the growing might and reach of its navy, holding its largest-ever fleet review in April in the South China Sea near the coast of Hainan Province.

Attended by Xi, the fleet review included 48 ships, among them the country's only

operational aircraft carrier, China state media reported.

The South China Sea is frequently the flashpoint between China and the U.S. Navy, which conducts regular freedom-of-navigation transits near disputed islands in the South China Sea. China, Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei have asserted varying degrees of sovereignty over those islands.

The aircraft carriers USS Ronald Reagan and USS John C. Stennis held joint drills off the coast of the Philippines earlier this month near the disputed Spratly Islands. China has expanded some Spratly atolls by dredging sand and then building military facilities and other infrastructure upon them.

US ship treats Venezuelan migrants in Colombia

Associated Press

RIOHACHA, Colombia — Venezuelan migrants aboard a U.S. Navy hospital ship were undergoing surgery Tuesday for everything from tooth extractions to hernias that have proven difficult to treat both in the country they fled and the one receiving them.

The USNS Comfort is docked off Colombia's coast near Venezuela and taking aboard hundreds of both Venezuelan and Colombian patients during its four-day mission to a region that has been an epicenter for migration in recent years.

The trip to Riohacha is part of a larger

11-week tour to several Latin American countries heavily affected by the exodus of Venezuelans, many of whom are driven to flee by lack of access to medicine and treatment in their home country.

Niurka Roldan said she left Venezuela with several decaying teeth and a jaw abnormality that she wasn't able to treat. During her two years in Colombia, she said she's struggled to make ends meet, let alone afford dental care.

"It was very frustrating not to be able to do this in my country, nor in Colombia," she said.

The Navy is taking patients needing

surgery aboard the ship while also operating two concurrent land medical sites for minor conditions. In the first day of service Monday, physicians tended to more than 700 patients and completed 39 surgeries.

Capt. Kevin Buckley said dental surgeries and operations to remove cataracts and hernias are among the most common procedures being performed — ailments that are relatively simple to fix and can have a big impact on quality of life.

"I feel like I'm a father watching my kid ride a bike for the first time," he said of the joy of watching patients see and live without pain again.

Senate moves to end US military's role in Yemen war

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Wednesday voted to move a legislative measure forward that could end the U.S. military role in Yemen and its support of the Saudi-led coalition there, effectively rebuking pleas from White House officials to dismiss the plan.

In a procedural vote late Wednesday, senators voted 63 to 37 for an upper chamber debate on the resolution to reverse U.S. support of the Saudis in war-torn Yemen.

The vote increases pressure on the White House to re-evaluate its current direction in Yemen, as well as push for a peaceful resolution of the country's ongoing civil war.

The move comes on the heels of a

closed-door meeting in the Capitol earlier Wednesday between senators and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Mattis and Pompeo urged the senators to thwart the resolution.

"That was the mission today, to try to stop this movement among senators to be very public about their disapproval of what's going on with the U.S. support of the Saudi coalition," said Kurt Couchman, vice president of Public Policy for Defense Priorities, a right-leaning Washington think tank.

The resolution now heads to a full floor Senate debate in the coming days.

Sens. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.; Mike Lee, R-Utah; and Chris Murphy, D-Conn., introduced Joint Resolution 54 in March, forcing a vote on the Yemen matter for the first time. The resolution was effectively rejected in a

55 to 44 vote, largely along party lines with Republicans voting against the measure.

Since that time, support for Saudi Arabia has diminished, especially in light of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi's slaying at the country's consulate in Turkey.

"We sent an important message today — that Congress will stand up to Saudi leadership when [the Trump] administration won't, and that Saudi Arabia will face consequences for the murder of Virginia resident Jamal Khashoggi as well as for the disastrous war in Yemen," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va. "We must cease support for this war — never authorized by Congress — that has taken thousands of lives and finally demand accountability for the Saudi regime's continued human rights abuses."

Extension likely for border mission

The Washington Post

The Trump administration is expected to extend the military mission along the U.S. border with Mexico, a White House official said Wednesday, likely keeping troops away from their normal posts through the holidays.

The official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss plans that have not yet been announced, said the assignment was expected to last at least 45 days beyond its scheduled end date of Dec. 15.

That decision would affect almost 6,000 active-duty military personnel now stationed in southern areas of Texas, Arizona and California, lengthening a mission that critics have described as an unnecessary ploy to galvanize anti-immigrant sentiment.

News of a possible extension, which was first reported by NPR, comes days after a dramatic confrontation at a border crossing outside San Diego.

Border Patrol and Department of Homeland Security officials this week defended authorities' use of tear gas against migrants, including women and children, who tried to rush the border fence at California's San Ysidro crossing on Sunday.

At least 5,000 migrants, many of them members of a caravan that has made its way through Mexico in recent weeks, are now waiting in Tijuana just across from San Diego to request asylum in the United States.

Previous administrations have sent National Guard troops to harden the border, but the use of large numbers of active-duty military personnel, who face legal limits to their domestic activities, has no modern precedent. Critics have said the deployment undermines the military's ability to prepare for foreign deployments.

Even before the incident at San Ysidro, the Pentagon had suggested an extension might be in the works.

"Some of those troops certainly will be home [for the holidays]; I would anticipate they would be," Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told reporters last week. "But some troops may not be or some new troops may be assigned to new missions . . . This is a dynamic situation."

As of Wednesday, DHS had not asked the Pentagon to extend the timeline of its border mission, said Lt. Col. Jamie Davis, a Pentagon spokesman.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, asked last week about the timetable for the troop deployment, said she had spoken to Mattis and had "no doubt" the Department of Defense would "continue to be our partners in this mission until it is resolved."

A DHS official said the chaotic scenes along the border Sunday, when U.S. agents used tear gas to drive back stone-throwing crowds of migrants breaking through the fence, had made evident the need for a troop presence.

"What we saw Sunday is a clear indication of why we need (military) support," the official said, also speaking on the condition of anonymity.

An announcement on the extension is expected as early as Friday. Last week, the White House issued an order that allows troops to use force to protect Border Patrol personnel and temporarily detain migrants.

The Pentagon has sought to tamp down speculation that troops could fire on migrants. Military police, who are typically armed and make up some of the forces deployed to the border, will bear primary responsibility for protecting Border Patrol, but officials say they will not be armed if they are conducting crowd control activities.

Officials expect the extended mission will have a greater emphasis on protecting border personnel rather than the logistics and engineering activities.

Hospitals hampered by lack of civilian doctors

BY WILL MORRIS

Stars and Stripes

Staff shortages at military hospitals have forced some to discontinue services, refer patients to private providers and send others to Veterans Affairs hospitals for treatment, a government watchdog has found.

In some cases, the lack of civilian personnel could threaten the accreditation of hospital programs.

One unnamed hospital was unable to meet "minimum staffing standards for labor and delivery" and officials had to refer patients to Tricare, the military's insurance network for private care, a Government Accountability Office review of the military health care system found.

Other shortages put laboratory services at risk at the same hospital and the accreditation of a hematology-oncology program at risk at another unnamed hospital, said the GAO report, released Tuesday.

The Senate had asked for a review of the military medical workforce mix in a report with last year's defense budget, citing a Pentagon estimate that an

inefficient medical workforce mix would cost the department \$3 billion over five years. It also cited a Defense Department-sponsored study that found taxpayer cost for military medical personnel "far exceeds the cost of civilian healthcare providers with comparable skills."

The GAO found "a number of challenges, including lengthy hiring and contracting processes and federal civilian hiring freezes (that) affect DOD's ability to use federal civilians and contractors."

As a result of those shortages, uniformed personnel are increasingly picking up the slack.

"Senior officials from one Air Force [facility] noted that morale of its military staff is negatively affected by extra hours and additional responsibilities placed on them to ensure continued operations," the study found.

Active-duty and reserve military personnel form the bulk of the workforce at hospitals and clinics, but government employees and contractors account for an average of 22 percent of the staff.

Iran adds mini subs to fleet

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's navy has acquired two new mini submarines designed for operations in shallow waters such as the Persian Gulf, Iranian state TV reported Thursday.

The report said one of the mini submarines — also known as midget submarines — was dubbed Ghadir-955 and was built in 18 months. The other, a previously built Ghadir-942, took 10 months to overhaul.

The subs have sonar-evading technology and can launch missiles from underwater as well as fire torpedoes and drop marine mines, the TV said. Iran began manufacturing Ghadir subs in 2005. The first was unveiled in 2007 and by 2012, five such

submarines were incorporated into Iran's navy.

Midget submarines weigh less than 150 metric tons and are used for short missions, with no living accommodations for a crew of up to nine. The TV broadcast footage of the inauguration of one the submarine in southern port of Bandar Abbas, at the mouth of the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the passageway for nearly a third of all oil traded by sea.

At the ceremony, Adm. Mojtahab Mohammadi said the sub is the 14th Iran-made vessel that joined the navy. Iran does not disclose the total number of submarines in its fleet; however, it is believed to have some 12 light and three Russian-made submarines.

Cohen pleads guilty to lying to Congress

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Michael Cohen, President Donald Trump's former lawyer, made a surprise appearance before a federal judge in New York on Thursday and pleaded guilty to lying to Congress to cover up that he was negotiating a real estate deal in Moscow on Trump's behalf during the heat of his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination.

Trump called Cohen a "weak person" who is lying to get a lighter sentence.

The charge was brought by special counsel Robert Mueller, who is investigating Russian interference in the presiden-

tial election, and was the result of his cooperation with that probe.

Flanked by his lawyers, Cohen admitted making false statements about the project in 2017 to Senate and House intelligence committees, which at the time were investigating possible connections between the Trump campaign and Russia.

His comments made clear that his communications with Trump about the project were much more frequent than he had suggested.

Cohen, 52, wearing a blue tie and dark suit, was noticeably relaxed throughout the appearance in a packed Manhattan

courtroom, unlike his irritable and emotional demeanor when he entered a guilty plea during the summer.

Cohen told the judge he lied about the timing of the negotiations, his communications with people in the company and in Russia about the deal, and other details to be loyal to Trump and consistent with Trump's "political messaging." Cohen and prosecutors referred to Trump as "individual one" throughout Thursday's proceedings and said he lied "to be loyal to Individual One."

Among other lies, Cohen said he told Congress that all discussions about building a Trump Tower in Moscow had ended by

January 2016, when they had actually continued until June of that year.

He said he also lied about his contacts with Russian officials and lied when he said he never agreed to travel to Russia in connection with the project and never discussed with Trump plans to travel to Moscow to support the project.

Prosecutors said in a court document that Cohen had misled Congress to give a false impression that the Moscow project had ended before the Iowa caucus and first Republican presidential primary in 2016.

China halts team's work on gene-edited babies

Associated Press

HONG KONG — China's government ordered a halt Thursday to work by a medical team that claimed to have helped make the world's first gene-edited babies as a group of leading scientists declared that it's still too soon to try to make permanent changes to DNA that can be inherited by future generations.

Chinese Vice Minister of Science and Technology Xu Nanping told state broadcaster CCTV that his ministry is strongly opposed to the efforts that reportedly produced twin girls born earlier this month. Xu called the team's actions illegal and unacceptable and said an investigation had been

ordered but made no mention of specific actions taken.

Researcher He Jiankui claims to have altered the DNA of the twins to try to make them resistant to infection with the AIDS virus. Mainstream scientists have condemned the experiment, and universities and government groups are investigating.

He's experiment "crossed the line of morality and ethics adhered to by the academic community and was shocking and unacceptable," Xu said.

A group of leading scientists gathered in Hong Kong this week for an international conference on gene editing, the ability to rewrite the code of life to try to correct or pre-

vent diseases. Although the science holds promise for helping people already born and studies testing that is underway, a statement issued Thursday by the 14-member conference leaders says it's irresponsible to try it on eggs, sperm or embryos except in lab research because not enough is known yet about its risks or safety.

The conference was rocked by the Chinese researcher's claim to have helped make the world's first gene-edited babies. Conference leaders called for an independent investigation of the claim by He, who spoke to the group Wednesday as international criticism of his claim mounted.

There is no independent con-

fimation of what He says he did. He was scheduled to speak again at the conference Thursday, but he left Hong Kong and through a spokesman sent a statement saying: "I will remain in China, my home country, and cooperate fully with all inquiries about my work. My raw data will be made available for third party review."

Several prominent scientists said the case showed a failure of the field to police itself and the need for stricter principles or regulations.

"It's not unreasonable to expect the scientific community" to follow guidelines, said David Baltimore, a Nobel laureate from the California Institute of Technology who led the panel.

Southwest apologizes after agent mocks a child named Abcde

The Washington Post

A Texas mother is calling out a Southwest Airlines employee who she said mocked her 5-year-old daughter's name and posted a picture of the child's boarding pass on social media.

Traci Redford told ABC affiliate KABC her daughter's

name is Abcde, pronounced "ab-si-dee."

The incident occurred several weeks ago when she and her daughter were preparing to board a flight from Santa Ana, Calif., to El Paso, Redford told the station. A gate agent at John Wayne Airport saw Abcde's name and started pointing,

laughing and talking to other employees about Redford and her child.

"And after two weeks of doing a formal complaint, Southwest hadn't done anything," Redford said.

Southwest Airlines has since apologized, saying that the social media post is "not in-

dicative of the care, respect, and civility" it requires of employees.

Although Abcde is an unusual name, it's not unheard of. In 2014, Vocativ reported that over the past three decades, 328 baby girls have been given that name, 32 of whom were born in 2009.

Alabama, Georgia meet in title game repeat

Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Hello again, Georgia and Alabama.

For the second time in less than 11 months, the two Southeastern Conference powers are set to meet at Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium with a championship on the line in a mentor-versus-protégé coaching showdown. Tua Tagovailoa's back, too, this time as anything but an understudy.

Kirby Smart's fourth-ranked Georgia Bulldogs (11-1, 7-1 SEC) get another crack at Nick Saban and No. 1 Alabama (12-0, 8-0) on Saturday in the SEC championship game. They put on quite a show in an overtime thriller with a national title on the line back in January.

Tagovailoa came off the bench to lead a second-half comeback and returns as perhaps the Heisman Trophy front-runner.

A rematch almost seemed in-

evitable with both teams clearly the cream of their divisions. But Smart says the Alabama rematch couldn't be a focal point because "certainly both teams had to win some football games to get to it."

That future-oriented mentality wouldn't fit The Process, Saban's acclaimed methodology that Smart absorbed as his longtime assistant at Alabama, LSU and the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

"I've never been around really good teams that are focused on other teams," Smart said. "The good teams I've been around are focusing on whoever they play that week. And it's really not been different for us this year."

Both teams dispatched their in-state rivals with relative ease leading up to this game. Georgia raced to a 38-7 half-time lead in a 45-21 win over Georgia Tech. The Tide struggled in the first half but ran

away from Auburn, 52-21.

But they've known this meeting was coming since Nov. 3, the earliest the title game matchup has been set. Really, they've been on a collision course since that national title clash.

Saban called the Bulldogs "probably one of the most complete teams in the nation in terms of offense, defense, special teams."

Alabama has won every game since the national title game by 20-plus points, a 12-game streak that is the longest to open a season in NCAA history. The previous record of 10 consecutive 20-point wins at any point during a season was set by Boise State in 2002.

Alabama has reached the 12-win mark for the ninth time in the last 11 seasons.

The Bulldogs haven't had that kind of sustained success, but they've been awfully good the past two years.

They have won five straight

by 17-plus points since dropping a similarly lopsided game to No. 12 LSU.

The January meeting ended with Tagovailoa's winning, second-and-26 touchdown pass to DeVonta Smith in overtime. Now, Tagovailoa could perhaps cement the Heisman if he's as good for four quarters as he was for two on that last visit. He wasn't particularly interested in talking about either the Heisman or last season.

"That was last year," Tagovailoa said. "For me, I just want to enjoy this win with my team, with that 24-hour (celebration) rule. And coming back into the office on Monday, we want to focus on Georgia."

Georgia quarterback Jake Fromm resisted the temptation to talk about 'Bama after the Georgia Tech game.

"I'm not supposed to," Fromm said.

Georgia Tech's Johnson set to retire after 11 seasons

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Paul Johnson, the longest-serving Georgia Tech coach in a half-century and architect of a triple-option offense that was an anomaly among Power Five schools, announced his retirement Wednesday after 11 seasons with the Yellow Jackets.

The 61-year-old Johnson revealed the surprising decision after meeting with his players. It came just four days after Georgia Tech closed the regular season with a lopsided loss to No. 4 Georgia.

Johnson, who also coached at Georgia Southern and Navy, compiled a career record of 82-59 at the Atlantic Coast Conference school, including eight bowl appearances and three trips to the league championship game.

He will stick around for another month, leading the Yellow Jackets for the final time in their bowl game. Most projections have them going to the Military Bowl on Dec. 31.

"After 40 years of coaching, it's time to take a break," Johnson said in a statement. "My family has sacrificed a lot over the years. I want to watch my daughter (Kaitlyn, a professional opera singer) perform and do some things with my wife (Susan)

that we've never had a chance to do. It's been a great run for the last 11 years here on the Flats. I'm proud of what we've accomplished and am looking forward to having the chance to coach this team one last time at our bowl game next month."

Johnson planned to discuss his decision at a Thursday morning news conference. During an interview with WXIA-TV outside Bobby Dodd Stadium, he said the decision to retire was entirely his but didn't rule out a return to coaching.

"I've been thinking about it for a while," he said. "I'm not sure I'm done coaching, but I need a break. I'm going to take some time off with the family and decide if I like it. If it works, it'll be great. If it doesn't, I'll resurface somewhere else."

"It's been a good run," he added. "I'll always be a Tech fan."

This season, the Yellow Jackets bounced back from a 1-3 start to finish 7-5, winning four straight games before a 45-21 loss at Georgia last Saturday.

Georgia Tech finished 5-3 in the ACC, its first winning record in conference play since 2014.

Johnson is best known for his triple-option offense, which produced gaudy rushing statistics but was criticized for being one-dimensional and out of touch with

today's wide-open offensive schemes. The Yellow Jackets lead the nation with an average of almost 335 yards per game on the ground, but they completed only 11 passes in their last five games.

Georgia Tech athletic director Todd Stansbury praised Johnson for his long tenure at the school. He demonstrated his support for the coach this past spring by working out a two-year extension that ran through the 2022 season. Johnson's current deal paid him roughly \$3 million a season.

Bobby Dodd, Bill Alexander and John Heisman — all members of the College Football Hall of Fame — were the only coaches to serve longer and post more wins at Georgia Tech.

"I was saddened when Coach Johnson informed me that he was going to step down as our head coach," Stansbury said. "Not only is he Georgia Tech's winningest head coach in more than 50 years but he is also an incredible mentor for the young men in our football program and has helped develop countless student-athletes that have gone on to great success after graduation."

Johnson's overall record is 189-98, with only four losing seasons in his 22 years as a head coach.

College basketball roundup

No. 7 Michigan hammers North Carolina

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — After 40 minutes of poised offense and smothering defense by Michigan, North Carolina coach Roy Williams was at the end of his wits.

"As a coach, I feel like I've done the worst job with this team in 31 years as a head coach, but give Michigan the credit," Williams said. "They made the tougher plays."

Williams' frustration was understandable, but his team didn't look much worse than the other opponents that have faced seventh-ranked Michigan lately. Charles Matthews had 21 points and seven rebounds, and Xavier Simpson spearheaded another strong

defensive effort as the Wolverines rolled to an 84-67 victory over the 11th-ranked Tar Heels on Wednesday night.

Jordan Poole scored 15 of his 18 points in the second half for Michigan (7-0), which led 39-35 at halftime and then shut down the Tar Heels' fast-paced offense for a while. North Carolina (6-2) came in averaging 96.6 points per game, but Michigan was allowing half that at 48.3. The Tar Heels ended up between those two extremes, but a good deal closer to the lower number.

No. 4 Virginia 76, No. 24 Maryland 71: Kyle Guy scored 18 points and the visiting Cavaliers combined effective outside shooting with its usual stout defense to slip past the Terrapins

in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

Virginia (7-0) blew most of a 17-point lead before making six free throws in the final 37 seconds to hand Maryland its first loss. Ty Jerome scored 17 and De'Andre Hunter had 15 for Virginia, which improved to 121-35 in nonconference games under coach Tony Bennett.

No. 6 Tennessee 95, Eastern Kentucky 67: Grant Williams had 21 points and 11 rebounds as the host Volunteers bounced back from their first loss.

No. 8 Auburn 99, Saint Peter's 49: Anfernee McLemore and Bryce Brown each scored 19 points as the host Tigers rolled past the Peacocks.

No. 10 Kentucky 90, Monmouth 44: Tyler Herro had 16 points, Keldon Johnson added

15 and the host Wildcats cruised past the Hawks for their sixth straight victory.

No. 15 Florida State 73, No. 19 Purdue 72: Trent Forrest forced a turnover with 16 seconds left and drove the lane to hit a pull-up jumper with 5.2 seconds remaining as the host Seminoles rallied to beat the Boilermakers.

Syracuse 72, No. 16 Ohio State 62: Tyus Battle scored 20 points and Elijah Hughes added 18 to help the Orange upset the host Buckeyes in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

Syracuse (4-2) won its second straight by shooting 49 percent from the field and 46 percent from three-point range.

Steelers' Connor wants to do away with fumble woes

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Ben Roethlisberger cut off the question mid-sentence. The quicker to dismiss it, the better.

No, the Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback stressed, there are no issues about running back James Conner's ability to hold onto the ball even after Conner's fumble late in the third quarter on Sunday in Denver swung momentum to the Broncos in what became a 24-17 loss that ended Pittsburgh's six-game winning streak.

"I'll stop you now," Roethlisberger said Wednesday. "There is no concern and we have all the confidence in him. We are going to ride with James because he's our guy."

Conner took responsibility for the mistake, saying he didn't do a good job covering up before getting hit by Denver's Bradley Roby at the end of a 23-yard reception. The fumble was Conner's fourth of the season, tying him with Chicago's Tarik Cohen and Dallas' Ezekiel Elliott for most in the NFL by a non-quarterback.

"It's correctable," Conner said. "It's not something that's going to be a problem for me."

It can't be if the Steelers (7-3-1) want to lock down their fifth straight playoff appearance. Pittsburgh righted its season by relying heavily on Conner after falling into a 1-2-1 hole. He averaged 172.3 yards from scrimmage during a four-game stretch from Oct. 7-Nov. 4, a surge that earned him AFC offensive player of the month honors for October and made the absence of two-time All-Pro Le'Veon Bell a non-issue.

Those numbers have taken a steep drop since Conner left a blowout of Carolina on Nov. 8 with a concussion. He had just 15 touches in a comeback win over Jacksonville on Nov. 18, a number that would have crept up to 16 if he hadn't let a pass go through his hands on Pittsburgh's final drive that would have been a walk-in touchdown. That drop became moot when the Steelers found a way to win anyway.

Facing the NFL's 27th-ranked run defense last Sunday

in Denver, the Steelers opted to have Roethlisberger throw 58 times. Conner finished with 17 touches against the Broncos and just one after the fumble, a 1-yard run on second-and-goal from the Denver 3 with 1:53 left. Roethlisberger faked a handoff to Conner on the next play and threw a game-ending pick in the end zone.

Conner shrugged when asked about his drop in opportunities in recent weeks. The former college star at Pittsburgh understands he's just a second-year player who has hardly earned the right to start making demands.

"(Offensive coordinator) Randy (Fichtner) has a game plan," Conner said. "We talk about it in the hotel before the game and that's just what it is. I'm in no position. It doesn't matter what I like. My job is just to go out there and execute."

Maybe, but the guys blocking for Conner wouldn't mind it if they saw his No. 30 coming up behind them at the line of scrimmage with a head of steam.

"We got to get him the ball, get him back heated up again, getting him some runs he feels comfortable with, get him more involved in the game plan," center Maurkice Pouncey said. "Obviously whenever he was doing things, he looked really, really good out there."

Conner fumbled in the fourth quarter in Cleveland in Week 1, which set the stage for a comeback that allowed the Browns to rally from a 14-point deficit and force a tie. He caught a break in Week 5 against Atlanta when the ball squirted free and rolled out of bounds as he tried to break a tackle inside the Falcons 10. In a rematch with Cleveland on Oct. 28, the Browns were up 6-0 when Conner fumbled at the Pittsburgh 27. Fullback Roosevelt Nix fell on it and Pittsburgh — feeding Conner regularly on a day he ran for 146 yards and two scores — got it together in time to win going away.

Steelers coach Mike Tomlin knows the Los Angeles Chargers (8-3) will test Conner when they visit on Sunday.

NBA roundup

Lillard sets Blazers' record for threes

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Damian Lillard didn't realize he was at 10 three-pointers. Had he known, well, maybe he would have gone for the record.

"I honestly didn't know I had made 10. If I would have known that I would have went for it," Lillard said, adding with a smile, "What is it? Fourteen? Oh, I could have got that, too."

Lillard set a franchise record for threes on his way to 41 points, and the Portland Trail Blazers held off the Orlando Magic 115-112 on Wednesday night.

Jusuf Nurkic added 16 points and 13 rebounds as the Blazers stopped a season-high three-game slide. Lillard surpassed the previous Portland record of nine threes that he shared with Nicolas Batum.

"It felt good. I've been struggling kind of shooting from three," Lillard said. "I shoot a lot of them. After practice, sometimes, before practice,

I've been shooting and shooting them. I knew eventually I would get hot and start making them. It just felt good."

He'll just have to wait for another chance at the NBA record of 14 set by Golden State's Klay Thompson in a game earlier this season.

Nikola Vucevic had 20 points and eight rebounds for the Magic, who have lost four of their last five games.

Thunder 100, Cavaliers 83: Russell Westbrook moved into a tie for third place on the NBA list for triple-doubles with 23 points, 19 rebounds and 15 assists, and host Oklahoma City completed a regular-season sweep of short-handed Cleveland.

Westbrook's triple-double was his third this season — all in the last four games — and the 107th of his career, matching Jason Kidd and trailing only Oscar Robertson (181) and Magic Johnson (138). Kidd took 1,247 games to reach 107, while Westbrook needed only 760.

Bucks 116, Bulls 113: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 36 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists, and Khris Middleton made a tiebreaking three-pointer with 5.2 seconds left to lift host Milwaukee over Chicago.

Jazz 101, Nets 91: Donovan Mitchell returned from a two-game absence with 29 points, taking over down the stretch and leading Utah past host Brooklyn.

Pelicans 125, Wizards 104: Anthony Davis had 28 points and 15 rebounds as New Orleans stemmed a four-game slide with a victory over visiting Washington.

Mavericks 128, Rockets 108: Rookie Luka Doncic and Devin Harris each scored 20 points, and Dallas beat host Houston despite a triple-double by Rockets star James Harden.

Harden had 25 points, 17 assists and 11 rebounds, but it wasn't nearly enough for a team missing Chris Paul because of an injury. Houston dropped its

fourth in a row after winning a season-high five straight.

Timberwolves 128, Spurs 89: Robert Covington scored 21 points, and the Timberwolves earned their fourth straight win.

Host Minnesota (11-11) reached .500 for the first time since Oct. 31. Karl-Anthony Towns and Derrick Rose each had 16 points, and Taj Gibson finished with 13.

76ers 117, Knicks 91: Joel Embiid put on a show with his father in the stands for the first time this season, collecting 26 points and 14 rebounds while leading host Philadelphia.

Hornets 108, Hawks 94: Jeremy Lamb scored 22 points, Cody Zeller had a season-high 19 and host Charlotte avenged a loss Sunday to Atlanta.

Clippers 115, Suns 99: Danilo Gallinari had 28 points and 10 rebounds as host Los Angeles won its ninth straight home game by defeating Phoenix.

NHL roundup

Matthews scores two goals in return to Maple Leafs

Associated Press

TORONTO — Auston Matthews says the last month was torture watching his Toronto Maple Leafs.

The star center jumped right back in the action at full speed Wednesday night.

Matthews had two goals and an assist in his return to the lineup after missing 14 games with a left shoulder injury and Toronto beat the San Jose Sharks 5-3 for their third straight victory.

"It kind of just eats away at you," Matthews said about his time on the shelf. "Watching what we've been able to do the last month, we've played pretty exceptional at times."

The 21-year-old American

was exceptional himself early with a goal and an assist on two power plays before adding the exclamation point on a third-period deflection to help Toronto pull even with surprising Buffalo atop the NHL's overall standings.

In between, however, Matthews didn't think he was all that impressive in his first game back playing on a line with speedsters Kasper Kapen and Andreas Johnsson.

"After the first I felt terrible," Matthews said. "The second period, I didn't feel too good and then in the third period I got my legs."

John Tavares also scored twice, former San Jose star Patrick Marleau added a goal, Mitch Marner had three as-

sists, and Johnsson finished with two assists to help Toronto improve to 18-8-0.

Tomas Hertl, Joe Pavelski and Melker Karlsson scored for San Jose, Logan Couture had two assists and Aaron Dell made 24 saves.

Matthews sat out 14 games after taking a clean hit from Winnipeg's Jacob Trouba on Oct. 27. He had 10 goals and six assists in the first seven games of the season, but was held off the scoresheet in three consecutive outings before getting hurt.

Avalanche 6, Penguins 3: Gabe Landeskog broke a tie midway through the third period and host Colorado overcame Sidney Crosby's natural hat trick to beat Pittsburgh.

Red Wings 4, Blues 3: Tyler Bertuzzi broke a tie with 6:53 to go with his second goal of the game and host Detroit held on after blowing a 3-0 lead.

Stars 4, Flames 3 (OT): Tyler Seguin scored 24 seconds into overtime to lift Dallas past host Calgary.

Jamie Benn knocked the puck into the slot, where Seguin was wide open and put a shot inside the goal post on David Rittich. The goalie argued he had been interfered with by Benn, but the goal stood up after a video review.

Ducks 3, Panthers 2: Nick Ritchie broke a tie with 1:28 left with his second goal of the game, John Gibson made 42 saves and Anaheim beat host Florida.