

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, September 15, 2016

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Service chiefs: DOD's budget picture bleak

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Sen. John McCain called the military service chiefs to Capitol Hill on Thursday to make the case for a bigger defense budget as lawmakers were poised to decide on whether to move ahead with a \$18 billion hike.

In committee testimony, the chiefs of the Army, the Marine Corps, the Air Force and the Navy complained about anemic budgets and painted bleak pictures of cash-strapped services with aging equipment, undertrained troops and a lack of preparations for war with a major world power such as Russia or China.

"The butcher's bill is paid in blood of American soldiers for unready forces and we have a long history of that," Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

McCain, R-Ariz., said U.S. forces will need an additional \$250 billion during the next five years just to fend off decline.

"We are lying to ourselves and the American people about the true cost of defending the nation," said McCain, the chairman of the committee.

The hearing comes just as Congress prepares for the release of an annual defense policy bill called the National Defense Authorization Act, which is being drafted by a conference committee lead by McCain and his counterpart in the House, Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas.

The compromise bill will show whether

McCain and Thornberry have agreed to a controversial proposal that would boost defense spending by \$18 billion to buy new ships and planes, would increase training and would give troops a bigger pay raise.

McCain, who failed to get Senate support for the higher spending earlier this year, has said a final bill could be ready for a vote as soon as next week. A decision to include the hike is likely to draw strong resistance, especially among Democrats who are demanding any increases be accompanied by more spending on domestic programs.

On Thursday, McCain warned the military has been squeezed for years and still faces five years of budget spending caps under a debt-reduction plan passed by Congress in 2011.

"What this means is that, over the next five years, our nation must come up with \$250 billion just to pay for our current defense strategy and our current programs of record," he said. "\$250 billion just to do what we are planning to do right now, which I think many of us would agree is insufficient to meet our present — let alone our future — challenges."

He called the money the true "hidden cost" of defending the country.

Adm. John Richardson, chief of naval operations, said the Navy has only been able to keep its deployed forces fully ready for a major war.

"These are ready for full-spectrum operation, but we are compromising the readiness of those ships and aircraft that

we will have to surge to achieve victory in a large conflict," Richardson said.

Also, eight years of budget fights, short-term funding solutions and recent caps on defense spending have "driven additional costs and time into almost everything we do," he said.

Gen. Robert Neller, the Marine Corps commandant, said tight budgets and a lack of equipment and training in the service's aviation programs is falling "on the backs of sergeants and staff sergeants" who are trying to maintain aircraft amid tight budgets.

The Marine Corps recently made headlines for cannibalizing old and decommissioned aircraft to keep its fleet in the air. Thornberry has called it evidence of a military readiness crisis.

"Based on the current fiscal environment ... we are all making trades and those trades require us to accept risks in certain areas," Neller said.

The \$18 billion proposed by Thornberry would fill some of the military's needs. It remains controversial because the money would come out of the anti-Islamic State war budget and would mean the war effort would run out of money in April.

Even if the House and the Senate agree on adding the \$18 billion in an NDAA bill, the overall federal budget remained uncertain Thursday due to deep divisions in Congress. The current budget expires at the end of September and lawmakers were discussing stopgap legislation to maintain funding levels until at least after the presidential election.

Opponents step up protests of Okinawa helipad plan

Associated Press

TOKYO — Opponents of planned U.S. helipads on Japan's southern island of Okinawa have stepped up protests in Tokyo after the central government used military aircraft to transport equipment for the project.

The U.S. Marine Corps helipads are to be used by MV-22 Osprey aircraft, which are wide-

ly opposed on Okinawa because of concerns that the tilt-rotor hybrid aircraft might be prone to crashes. In exchange for the helipads, the U.S. military has pledged to return part of a training base to civilian use.

The project has been stalled for years because of protests and environmental concerns after two of the six planned helipads were built in Takae, a small village with 150 residents

next to a rich forest in northern Okinawa.

The controversy resurfaced recently when Japan's government tried to resume construction of the helipads after the relocation of a higher-profile Marine air station also was stalled.

Opposition lawmakers and activists on Thursday accused Japan's government of discriminating against Okinawa by de-

ploying riot police and military forces from mainland Japan.

The group summoned five defense officials and demanded an explanation of the use of Japanese military aircraft to circumvent the protests.

The protest escalated after the Defense Ministry used two CH-47 helicopters this week to transport dump trucks and other construction equipment for the helipads.

Mission shows support to Bulgaria

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Soviet-era combat aircraft are sharing the skies over Bulgaria with U.S. fighter jets this week, conducting for the first time a joint NATO air policing mission aimed at boosting NATO's eastern flank along the Black Sea.

Four F-15C Eagles from the California and Massachusetts Air National Guards are patrolling Bulgarian airspace with Bulgarian air force MiG-29s, Air Force and NATO officials said. The historic mission is brief: It began Sept. 9 and is scheduled to end Friday.

The Bulgarian Parliament approved the first joint national air patrols in February 2016. NATO officials have said an extension of the mission is up to Bulgarian officials.

The F-15C Eagles, along with about 75 airmen from the 194th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, were dispatched from Campia Turzii in Romania to Bulgaria's Graf Ignatievo air base for the brief mission. The squadron is serving out a six-month deployment to Romania to support Operation Atlantic Resolve, a demonstration of the U.S. commitment to the collective security of NATO in response to Russia's increased military and political assertiveness in eastern Europe. Active-duty airmen from Spangdahlem Air Base are also assisting the mission in support roles, the Air Force said.

"It's important that we are standing side by side with our NATO allies," Lt. Col. Cesar Gonzalez, a 194th EFS aircraft maintenance commander, was quoted as saying in a state-

ment from U.S. Air Forces in Europe–Air Forces Africa. "We are committed to the security of Europe and helping Bulgaria and countries who ask for our help."

The mission confirms NATO's resolve to "preserve the integrity" of allied airspace, Brig. Gen. Nico Tak, a director at NATO's Allied Command Operations, said in a statement.

In air policing, NATO jets are able to immediately scramble to respond to military and civilian aircraft that do not follow international flight regulations or approach NATO airspace without proper clearance, according to NATO. As part of the mission, they can also respond to civilian aircraft in distress.

NATO has stepped up its air policing in eastern Europe since Russia's incursion into Ukraine in 2014.

Bulgarian Defense Minister Nikolay Nenchev said the joint air patrols would relieve some of the financial burden on the Bulgarian air forces, the Sofia News Agency reported.

Bulgaria, a former communist nation that's been a part of NATO since 2004, borders on its east the Black Sea, a resource-rich area that's of strategic importance to Russia. The Bulgarians have expressed concern about recent Russian incursions into their airspace.

Nenchev told Bulgarian television channel NOVA TV in July that Russian military aircraft had entered "Bulgaria's area of responsibility" four times and that Russian passenger planes had breached the country's airspace six times, Reuters reported.

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General: Movies, books 'hurting' special operations

The Washington Post

Army Gen. Raymond "Tony" Thomas, head of U.S. Special Operations Command, rarely talks specifics about the troops under his command. Direct-action raids in Iraq, rescue missions in Afghanistan, special operations forces deployed in places like Syria, Somalia and Yemen are all — if even acknowledged — described in broad platitudes.

But when asked about the propensity of some of his elite forces to write books, to star in movies and to help advise on the production of certain video games, Thomas is outspoken — and angry.

"It is a phenomenon that is anathema to me," Thomas said during a conference hosted by the Institute for the Study of War in Washington on Wednesday. "It runs counter to everything that any of us who ever

entered special operations know [is] the right way to do business. It baffles me that people don't hold true to that standard.

"We won't tolerate it," he added. While much of the press surrounding special operations forces has centered on a relatively small component of it — the SEALs — Thomas said the issue of unwelcome publicity is spread across the various components of his command.

"Enforcing it isn't exclusive to one camp of special operators," Thomas said. "We're hurting ourselves with this gratuitous release of movies, books and whatnot."

Since Operation Neptune Spear, the May 2, 2011, mission that saw a mix of special operations troops, including SEAL Team 6, kill bin Laden, a plethora of movies and books — many of which have been written by former team members — have flooded the market.

Naval Academy boosts vetting for instructors

The Washington Post

The U.S. Naval Academy's superintendent announced Monday that the school will correct a flaw in its vetting process that allowed a Marine Corps officer to teach there after he had been investigated for having sex with a female midshipman.

In June, *The Washington Post* revealed that Maj. Michael Pretus became an instructor not only because of a communication failure among military leaders, but also because of a systemic defect in the way the Naval Academy screens dozens of its staffers.

The military did vet Pretus when he was selected in 2012 to

get an advanced degree in history that would prepare him to teach. But the Iraq War veteran faced a crisis during the two years and eight months between when he received the news and when he was scheduled to start working in Annapolis.

A former female midshipman told authorities that while attending the academy in 2011, she had a threesome with him and another Marine, Maj. Mark Thompson, who taught history and was later convicted of sexual misconduct. Her accusation against Pretus triggered a criminal investigation that, according to military records, ended only after he refused to cooperate.

GOP deal averts vote on impeaching IRS head

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A last-minute deal between conservatives and GOP leaders in the House averted votes expected Thursday on a measure to impeach the commissioner of the IRS.

Instead, IRS Commissioner John Koskinen will testify before Congress next week.

The conservative House Freedom Caucus celebrated the development as a victory, as conservatives had long pushed GOP leaders for impeachment hearings against Koskinen. They accuse him of obstructing a congressional investigation into the treatment of tea party groups seeking tax exemptions.

But the agreement canceling the votes came only after conservatives themselves predicted that their impeachment resolution was going to get sidelined by Demo-

cratic and Republican opposition Thursday. So instead they settled for a hearing next Wednesday, which would result in an impeachment vote only after the November presidential election, if ever.

House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin welcomed the resolution, telling journalists Thursday that it “was a good way to work things out.” Neither Ryan nor other House GOP leaders had embraced the impeachment push, but Ryan, who needs to maintain conservative support, had also avoided publicly criticizing the move.

“I think it’s a win-win for everybody,” said GOP Rep. John Fleming of Louisiana, a ringleader of the impeachment effort. “And ultimately, we get the hearing, we get the information, and hopefully we’ll have more disclosures that tell us it’s important to go ahead and end this man’s tenure as head of the IRS.”

However, it would take only one ag-

grieved conservative to revive the impeachment on the House floor, so the deal does not definitively rule out a vote before the election.

Koskinen has disputed the allegations against him in private meetings with House Republicans in recent days, while in public, the agency insisted Wednesday that he “remains focused on the critical work needed for the nation’s tax system.”

Some Republicans, while critical of Koskinen’s conduct, questioned whether it amounted to the constitutional standard of “high crimes and misdemeanors.” They worried about setting a bad precedent in pursuing the impeachment claim, especially just ahead of the election. The original conduct the House was investigating, related to how tea party groups were dealt with by the IRS, happened before Koskinen’s tenure.

Trump releases doctor’s letter on latest physical

The Washington Post

Donald Trump has provided to The Washington Post a letter that summarizes his latest physical exam and discussed the results on a television show scheduled to air Thursday afternoon, bringing his health to the fore of the presidential race.

Trump disclosed the one-page letter from his longtime doctor, Harold Bornstein, to The Washington Post on Thursday.

The letter says that Trump takes a statin, a drug for lowering cholesterol, and has a body mass index in the overweight range. Overall, he is described as having “excellent physical health.”

“He takes a lipid lowering agent (rosuvastatin) and a low dose aspirin. He does not use tobacco products or alcohol,” Bornstein writes.

A day earlier, Trump had a conversation about the document with talk-show host and surgeon Mehmet Oz during a taping in New York. Oz’s exchange with the Republican presidential nominee will be

broadcast Thursday afternoon on his syndicated program.

While the letter released by Trump gives more information on his health and physical makeup than previously known, it does not constitute his medical records nor does it give extensive detail about past health matters.

A gastroenterological specialist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York, Bornstein circulated a letter last year attesting to Trump’s “extraordinary” health and said Trump would be “the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency.”

But Bornstein later made headlines when he told NBC News that he wrote the letter quickly as a Trump associate waited to collect it, though he stood by his glowing assessment.

In the letter released Thursday, which is dated Sept. 13, Bornstein states that Trump, 70, has been under his care since 1980, and sits for an annual physical exam. The candidate is listed as 6 foot 3 inches tall and weighing 236 pounds, making him overweight for his height.

Clinton releases health info, campaigns again

Associated Press

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. — Hillary Clinton returned to the campaign trail Thursday after a bout of pneumonia that sidelined her for three days and revived questions about both Donald Trump’s and her openness regarding their health.

“I’m really glad that I did finally follow my doctor’s orders and take some days to rest instead of just trying to keep powering through, which I think is a common experience for people,” Clinton told the “Tom Joyner Morning Show” in an interview broadcast Thursday morning.

Clinton and Trump both released letters from their doctors this week with additional details about their health, including their cholesterol levels, blood pressure and current medications. Both candidates’ physicians declared them fit to serve as president.

In releasing a letter from Trump’s doctor Thursday, Trump’s team appeared to take a swipe at Clinton’s brief absence from the campaign trail.

“We are pleased to disclose

all of the test results which show that Mr. Trump is in excellent health, and has the stamina to endure — uninterrupted — the rigors of a punishing and unprecedented presidential campaign and, more importantly, the singularly demanding job of president of the United States,” the campaign said in statement.

The Clinton campaign’s handling of her pneumonia underscored her penchant for privacy, something that has contributed to the public’s lack of trust in the former secretary of state. Less than two months from Election Day, that has contributed to a race that is tighter than many expected.

Clinton was campaigning Thursday in Greensboro, N.C., and speaking to a Hispanic group in Washington. Those are her first public appearances since Sunday, when she abruptly left a 9/11 memorial service in New York after becoming dizzy and dehydrated.

Clinton’s remarks Thursday were to focus on lifting up children and families, as the campaign tries to break through with a more positive message.

Teen with BB gun shot

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A police officer responding to a reported armed robbery shot and killed a 13-year-old boy when the teen pulled a firearm from his waistband that later was determined to be a BB gun, police said Thursday.

The shooting happened about nightfall Wednesday in an alley east of downtown Columbus after a short foot chase.

Columbus police said officers responded to a report of an armed robbery involving multiple suspects and were told by the victim that a group of people had approached him and demanded money. The victim said one of them had a gun.

Down the block, officers

spotted three males who matched the description of the suspected robbers, and two of them ran away when officers tried to speak with them, police said. Officers followed the pair into a nearby alley and tried to take them into custody, and one of the suspects pulled out a gun, police said. One officer fired, hitting the 13-year-old repeatedly.

That suspect, later identified as Tyree King, was taken to a children's hospital, where he died. The officers and the other male involved in the encounter weren't injured.

Neighborhood resident Chris Naderer told The Columbus Dispatch he was home at the time and heard someone knock down a gate in his backyard,

then saw an officer chasing two young men into the alley and heard several gunshots.

Police reviewing evidence from the scene determined the boy's firearm was actually a BB gun with an attached laser sight.

The male who had been with Tyree was interviewed and released pending further investigation, police said. They provided no further information about him.

Police said additional suspects were being sought as the shooting and the suspected robbery remained under investigation.

The shooting will be reviewed internally, which is required under Columbus Division of Police protocol.

US, Israel sign \$38B security pact

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States on Wednesday signed an unprecedented new security agreement with Israel that will give the Israeli military \$38 billion over 10 years.

The deal, the largest such agreement the U.S. has ever had with any country, amounts to \$3.8 billion per year beginning in budget year 2019, compared with \$3.1 billion the U.S. gave Israel annually under the current 10-year deal that expires in 2018.

"This commitment to Israel's security has been unwavering and is based on a genuine and abiding concern for the welfare of the Israeli people and the future of the state of Israel," President Barack Obama said in a statement.

After months of negotiations that took place after a particularly tense time in the relationship amid disputes over the Iran nuclear deal, the memorandum of understanding was signed at the State Department by Israel's national security adviser, Jacob Nagel, and Thomas Shannon, the third-highest-ranking U.S. diplomat.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted those tensions but stressed that the agreement proves that "relations between Israel and the United States are strong, powerful."

"This doesn't mean there are not disagreements from time to time, but these are disagreements within the family," he said. "They do not impact the great friendship between Israel and the U.S., friendship that is evidenced in this agreement that will greatly help in forging Israel's power in the coming decade."

Under the agreement, Israel's ability to spend part of the funds on Israeli military products will be phased out and eventually all of the money must be spent on American military industries. Israel's preference for spending some internally had been a major sticking point in the deal.

Former killer: Duterte ordered hits

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — A former Filipino militiaman testified before the country's Senate on Thursday that President Rodrigo Duterte, when he was still a city mayor, ordered him and other members of a liquidation squad to kill criminals and opponents in gangland-style assaults that left about 1,000 dead.

Edgar Matobato, 57, told the nationally televised Senate committee hearing that he heard Duterte order some of the killings, and acknowledged that he, himself, carried out about 50 deadly assaults as an assassin.

Rights groups have long accused Duterte of involvement in death squads, claims he has denied even while engaging in tough talk in which he stated his approach to criminals was to "kill them all." Matobato is the first person to admit any role in such killings, and to directly implicate Duterte under oath in a public hearing.

The Senate committee inquiry was led by Sen. Leila de Lima, a staunch critic of Duterte's anti-drug campaign that has left more than 3,000 suspected drug

users and dealers dead since he assumed the presidency in June. Duterte has accused de Lima of involvement in illegal drugs, alleging that she used to have a driver who took money from detained drug lords. She has denied the allegations.

Matobato said Duterte had once even issued an order to kill de Lima, when she chaired the Commission on Human Rights and was investigating the mayor's possible role in extrajudicial killings in 2009 in Davao. He said he and others were waiting to ambush de Lima but she did not go to a part of a hilly area — a suspected mass grave — where they were waiting to open fire.

"If you went inside the upper portion, we were already in ambush position," Matobato told de Lima. "It's good that you left."

The recent killings of suspected drug dealers have sparked concerns in the Philippines and among U.N. and U.S. officials, who have urged Duterte's government to take steps to rapidly stop the killings and ensure his anti-drug war complies with human rights laws and the rule of law.

Duterte has rejected the criticisms, questioning the right of the U.N., the U.S. and President Barack Obama to raise human rights issues when U.S. forces, for example, had massacred Muslims in the country's south in the early 1900s as part of a pacification campaign.

Matobato said under oath that the killings went on from 1988, when Duterte first became Davao city mayor, to 2013, when Matobato said he expressed his desire to leave the death squad. He said that prompted his colleagues to implicate him criminally in one killing to silence him.

"Our job was to kill criminals like drug pushers, rapists, snatchers. These are the kind we killed every day," Matobato said. But he said their targets were not only criminals but also opponents of Duterte and one of his sons, Paolo Duterte, who is now the vice mayor of Davao.

Presidential spokesman Martin Andanar rejected the allegations, saying government investigations into Duterte's time as mayor of Davao had already gone nowhere because of a lack of evidence and witnesses.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Civil War cannonball found in a basement

NJ LEONIA — Police said a worker renovating a home in New Jersey found a Civil War-era cannonball.

Leonia police were called to the home Tuesday after the worker discovered it on a basement window sill.

The Bergen County Sheriff's Bomb Squad removed it and safely disposed of it.

Police said the home's previous owner was a history buff.

Semi hauling water crashes into winery

CO DENVER — A semi-trailer hauling water slammed into an unoccupied winery in Park County, destroying the building.

The Colorado State Patrol said the accident occurred overnight Monday in the small community of Bailey, about 40 miles southwest of Denver.

Trooper Nate Reid told The Denver Post that the truck crashed into the Aspen Peak Cellars winery, which was closed at the time.

Reid said the truck was southbound on U.S. 285 when it entered a curve at the bottom of a steep hill, traveled across the northbound lanes and went off the road.

The driver, who was not identified, was taken to St. Anthony Hospital in Lakewood with serious injuries.

Replica voyaging canoe sets sail from island

HI LIHUE — After nearly two decades of construction, a replica Polynesian voyaging canoe has set sail from Kauai.

The Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported that the Nama-

hoe launched Sunday, marking what is believed to be the first Hawaiian voyaging canoe to set sail from the island in about five centuries.

The 72-foot-long Namahoe took 17 years to build and is among the growing fleet of similar replica vessels to come from the Hawaiian islands in recent years. The best known of the ships is the Hokulea, which is currently on a three-year voyage around the world.

Voyagers plan to embark on a journey around the island in Namahoe. The goal is to eventually sail Namahoe to Tahiti to coincide with the arrival of Hokulea.

2 teens arrested after minivan driver attacked

MA CHELSEA — Police arrested two suburban Boston teens after they allegedly stabbed a minivan driver who they'd hired to give them a ride.

The 15-year-old and 17-year-old suspects were scheduled to be arraigned in Chelsea District Court on charges of armed assault with intent to murder and assault and battery.

Police said the unidentified teens stabbed the 57-year-old driver in his vehicle around 6:40 p.m. Sunday in Chelsea. The victim was seriously injured in the attack and was rushed to Massachusetts General Hospital, where he was listed in stable condition.

Murder trial to come after kidnap sentencing

UT FARMINGTON — Wyoming prosecutors say a man will face murder charges in a train worker's death after he's sentenced in a separate kidnapping case in Utah.

Lincoln County Attorney

Spencer Allred said Monday that Dereck James "DJ" Harrison, 23, could be extradited to Wyoming by mid-November. He's charged with murder and kidnapping in 63-year-old Kay Ricks' slaying.

He and his father are accused of tying up a woman and her four teenage daughters in a Utah basement and then snatching Ricks while on the run from police. Prosecutors say the Harrisons killed Ricks on the way to a Wyoming hideout.

Harrison took a plea deal in the Utah case Monday and agreed not to fight extradition. His father killed himself in jail.

Company that hired gunman facing a fine

FL PALM BEACH GARDENS — The security company that employed the Pulse nightclub gunman faces a \$151,400 fine for falsely listing psychological testing information on forms that allowed employees to carry guns.

Multiple news outlets report the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services fined G4S Secure Solutions.

Investigators found the Palm Beach Gardens company listed the wrong psychologist's name on more than 1,500 forms between 2006 and 2016.

One form belonged to Omar Mateen, the gunman in the June 12 massacre who was killed by police. The company had filed the September 2007 form to allow him to carry a gun as a security guard.

Man sentenced to life requests death penalty

OR EUGENE — A Springfield man who has pleaded guilty to murder-

ing his girlfriend asked for the death penalty rather than life in prison.

The Register-Guard reported that a judge told William Eric Oliver the death sentence was not an option in his case.

Oliver pleaded guilty to murdering Cynthia Corey in their Springfield apartment on Sept. 9, 2015. He was sentenced to life in prison, with the possibility of parole after 25 years.

According to court documents, the couple had recently moved to Oregon from San Francisco and Oliver was not adjusting well. When Corey asked to discuss their living arrangements — the couple was sleeping in separate beds — Oliver stabbed her more than 40 times.

Boy in OD photo now in another relative's care

OH LISBON — A 4-year-old Ohio boy pictured in police photos in the backseat of a car while his grandmother and her boyfriend were slumped over from a drug overdose is moving in with other relatives.

Columbiana County Juvenile Court administrator Dane Walton told The Associated Press that the boy's great uncle and great aunt in South Carolina petitioned the court for custody, which was granted Monday by a judge.

Walton said the grandmother, Rhonda Pasek, was granted custody of the boy six weeks ago. Walton said the judge's report shows that at the time there was "no evidence brought forward" of any drug issues with Pasek.

Pasek is being held on a child endangerment charge. James Acord pleaded guilty to child endangerment and operating a vehicle while intoxicated.

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No. 1 Alabama widens gap with SEC

Associated Press

The gap separating defending national champion Alabama from its Southeastern Conference rivals doesn't seem to be closing.

If anything, it's getting wider.

While every other team in the SEC either already has lost a game or had a relatively close call, No. 1 Alabama (2-0) has outscored its first two opponents 90-16 and is still finding things it could have done better.

"It's the Bama way," Alabama tight end O.J. Howard said. "It's just the way that we carry ourselves. We are a hard-nosed football team. We want to play at our standard that makes people not want to play us anymore, and I think we didn't play that way Saturday. So it's a disappointment right now."

The seemingly widening gap is also disappointing for the rest of the league.

A test of Alabama's superiority comes Saturday when it opens SEC competition at No. 19 Mississippi (1-1), the one team that seems to have the Crimson Tide's number. Alabama is 0-2 against Ole Miss and 28-1 against all other opponents since the start of the 2015 season.

"I have great respect for (Alabama coach Nick Saban) and the job he's done," Ole Miss coach Hugh Freeze said. "They just continue to stockpile depth with four- and five-star kids. It's very difficult to say that you're ever going to overcome the gap. I think we've closed it considerably. Obviously, the proof is on the field."

No one in the league is conceding anything to the Crimson Tide. In some respects,

the SEC looks as deep as ever with eight of its 14 members in this week's Top 25.

"The SEC's the SEC," Tennessee defensive tackle Kendal Vickers said. "It's why everybody wants to come to the SEC. It's the best conference in the world. You'll see when SEC play comes. You'll see all the talent that comes out."

But a closer look at the poll indicates Alabama is indeed separating itself from everyone else.

Alabama, which has won four of the last seven national titles, is the only SEC team ranked 14th or higher. That also was the case in the last two regular-season polls in 2015 before Ole Miss climbed to 10th in the final rankings.

Before 2015, the last time only one SEC team was ranked 14th or higher was in the final poll of the 2000 season. The last time the SEC had only one team ranked in the top 14 of a September poll was in 1989.

"I think there's a little bit more of a gap, especially based on what we've seen the first two weeks," said SEC Network analyst Marcus Spears, who played at LSU from 2001-04. "They seem to be the only team that hasn't struggled to get wins. I think for the most part, though, it's just so early. You'll see teams get better."

Joining Alabama and Ole Miss in the Top 25 are No. 15 Tennessee, No. 16 Georgia, No. 17 Texas A&M, No. 20 LSU, No. 23 Florida and No. 24 Arkansas.

All the ranked teams other than Ole Miss and LSU are undefeated but haven't been dominant.

Tennessee was taken to overtime by Appalachian State and erased an early 10-point

deficit against Virginia Tech. Georgia eked out a two-point victory over Football Championship Subdivision program Nicholls. Texas A&M beat UCLA in overtime. Florida only led Massachusetts 10-7 through three quarters before pulling away for a 24-7 victory. Arkansas owns a one-point win over Louisiana Tech as well as an overtime road upset of TCU.

Spears believes Alabama's top challenger is "probably Texas A&M up to this point." He also mentioned Tennessee and Florida, though he noted the Volunteers need to let quarterback Joshua Dobbs "use his athleticism like they did against Virginia Tech when they started having success and not try to make him a pocket passer."

While there are questions about all the other SEC contenders, Alabama appears to have solved its biggest preseason concerns. Damien Harris has taken over for Heisman Trophy winner Derrick Henry and has averaged 9.1 yards per carry. Freshman quarterback Jalen Hurts has seamlessly replaced Jake Coker.

Alabama has signed the nation's top recruiting class each of the last six years, according to composite rankings of recruiting websites compiled by 247Sports. That gives Alabama an edge in talent that can be difficult to overcome.

"Your depth chart may not be on the even playing field," Freeze said. "But if you have a two-deep who are good enough to play and you get the right system and the right plan that has a chance to be successful against them, I think you have a fighting chance. I'll know more about that after Saturday."

As will the rest of the league.

ACC taking center stage after strong start

Associated Press

The Atlantic Coast Conference is off to one of its strongest starts in league history.

Often maligned as the weakest of the Power Five leagues, the ACC has three teams ranked in the top 10, tied with the Big Ten for the most. Its 17-5 record in non-conference games is the third-best start in ACC history.

The conference, and two of its biggest stars, will take center stage in college football Saturday when second-ranked Florida State (2-0) and No. 10 Louisville (2-0, 1-0 ACC) meet in Kentucky.

It's the first meeting of two top 10 teams from the ACC since Florida State and Miami in 2013.

"I think it's critical," Florida State

coach Jimbo Fisher said of what the show-down means to the ACC. "It adds to ... credibility."

The game features Florida State redshirt freshman quarterback Deondre Francois and Louisville's dual-threat dynamo Lamar Jackson, who has put his name into early Heisman Trophy talk with 13 touchdowns in two record-setting games.

Jackson was responsible for eight touchdowns by halftime in the Cardinals' season-opening win against Charlotte, and followed that up by running for four scores and passing for another in a 62-28 victory at Syracuse. With 411 passing yards and 199 rushing yards against the Orange, he became just the second 400-150 player in FBS history.

Francois, in his first start for the Seminoles, had 478 yards of offense in guiding

Florida State to its largest come-from-behind victory in a 45-34 triumph against No. 19 Mississippi.

In a league that has been recently viewed as Florida State, Clemson and everyone else, Fisher believes it's time for people outside the ACC to take another look and realize other teams in the league can compete with everyone.

The Seminoles beat Auburn for the 2013 national championship. Clemson made the title game last season, losing to Alabama, but Tigers quarterback Deshaun Watson was a prominent name in early Heisman talk this year as well.

"It is great, great football in the ACC and I'm glad that people are starting to see it," Fisher said.

ACC latest to relocate events from NC

Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. — The Atlantic Coast Conference has followed the NCAA's lead and is removing all its athletic championships from North Carolina over a state law limiting protections for LGBT people.

The ACC Council of Presidents voted Wednesday to relocate the league's championships until North Carolina repeals the law. The decision includes 10 neutral-site championships this academic year, which means relocating the ACC football title game that was scheduled to be played in Charlotte in December.

No announcement was made on where the championship events will be held.

"The decision to move the neutral site championships out of North Carolina while HB2 remains the law was not an easy one," said Clemson President James P. Clements, chairman of the league's council. "But it is consistent with the shared values of inclusion and non-discrimination at all our institutions."

On Monday, the NCAA said it was relocating seven of its championships scheduled to be played in the state, including the men's basketball first- and second-round matchups scheduled for next March in Greensboro, North Carolina.

ACC Commissioner John Swofford said after the NCAA's decision that his league would review its next steps.

The law requires transgender people to use restrooms at schools and government buildings corresponding to the sex on their

birth certificates. It also excludes gender identity and sexual orientation from local and statewide antidiscrimination protections. HB2 was signed into law earlier this year by Republican Gov. Pat McCrory, who has defended it as a commonsense safety and security measure.

Swofford said the presidents' choice was made on principle. "I think it was the right decision. A difficult one in ways, but an easy one in ways considering the principles involved," he said. "That's where our president's laid their bed so to speak, and I think we landed in the right place."

Swofford said identifying replacement venues is in the early stages, but hopes to get locations lined up as quickly as possible.

Finding a football stadium as ACC-friendly as Charlotte might be difficult. The championship game's been played at Bank of America Stadium for the past six seasons with an average attendance of 69,641. In the previous two seasons (2008-09) the game was held at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla., and averaged 49,412 spectators.

"We'll do what we need to do," Swofford said. "It's a challenge, our next challenge."

Football's not the only sport affected. The ACC planned to hold 14 of its 21 championship events in North Carolina this academic year, with the majority of those at neutral, off-campus, sites, and the others either on the campuses or the home venues of Wake Forest (field hockey), Duke (fencing), North Carolina (softball) and N.C.

State (wrestling, cross country).

Swofford said the ACC would consider the issue again in the spring if nothing changed in North Carolina's law. Such prohibitions can last for quite some time: The NCAA's ban on South Carolina hosting neutral-site championships for flying the Confederate flag on Statehouse grounds lasted from 2001 until it came down last summer.

This action by the ACC is the latest in a steady stream of public and business backlash against the law.

The NBA moved its 2017 All-Star Game to New Orleans instead of hosting it in Charlotte as originally scheduled because of the law. Duke's men's basketball schedule had to be reconfigured when Albany backed out due to that state's travel ban, and the Vermont women's basketball team canceled a December trip to play North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Entertainers such as Bruce Springsteen, Pearl Jam and Ringo Starr have canceled plans to play in North Carolina. And PayPal reversed plans to open a 400-employee operation center in Charlotte.

The ACC and NCAA decisions have been a blow to North Carolina's tourism and business communities, which rely on servicing fans attending major sporting events.

Scott Dupree, executive director of the Greater Raleigh Sports Alliance, said the recent announcements by the NCAA and ACC were "unprecedented and historically bad" for the state's sports event industry.

Bengals look to shore up defense vs. Steelers

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — No trying to put a positive spin on it. The Bengals' defense got run over during a season-opening win over the Jets, and there's an awful lot to fix heading into a matchup against a team that's been known to run all over them.

The Steelers (1-0) had one of the best rushing games against the Bengals last season during their 18-16 playoff win at Paul Brown Stadium, piling up 167 yards.

Their rematch in Pittsburgh on Sunday will come down partly to how well Cincinnati's defense handles DeAngelo Williams.

"It's the same old DeAngelo

Williams," said linebacker Karlos Dansby, who joined the Bengals as a free agent from Cleveland.

"Ain't nothing changed. The man is consistent. He's been explosive ever since he's been in the league. I've had an opportunity to play against him a lot of times and I haven't seen anything change."

In the opener, it was the Bengals' defense that looked very different.

The Jets ran 30 times for 152 yards, an average of 5.1 yards per carry. Matt Forte had 96 yards on 22 carries. During a 12-play drive that set up a field goal in the second half, the Jets ran nine times for 73 yards.

"We just gave up some runs that we don't typically give up," defensive coordinator Paul Guenther said. "Again, we had a lot of new guys playing. So some of those things are going to come."

Last season, the Bengals finished seventh in run defense, allowing 92.3 yards per game. They held opponents under 100 yards rushing in 10 of their 16 regular-season games.

Guenther said there were problems with players staying in their assigned spots in the run defense, which created holes for Forte. During that second-half drive, the Jets had runs of 13, 16 and 16 yards.

"It's nothing that we're going

to sit there and say, 'Oh, we got overpowered here,'" Guenther said. "It's a quick fix, that's what it's going to be."

Williams had a big game on Monday night during Pittsburgh's 38-16 win at Washington. He carried 26 times for 143 yards and a pair of touchdowns, and had six catches for 28 yards. Given how the Bengals struggled to stop Forte, they expect the Steelers to try to test their run defense early.

"We've just got to have a great start to the game," linebacker Rey Mauluga said. "We need all 11 people to do their job, basically, first and foremost. Just do that and I think we'll have a good chance of stopping them."

Cubs blank Cards, clinch playoff berth

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Jon Lester gave the Chicago Cubs a much-needed boost.

Anthony Rizzo hit a pair of home runs and Lester pitched eight dominant innings as the Cubs beat the St. Louis Cardinals 7-0 on Wednesday to clinch a playoff berth.

The Cubs improved their major league-best record to 93-52, and their magic number is one to clinch their first NL Central title since 2008. They can wrap up the division crown Thursday night with a win at home over Milwaukee or a St. Louis loss in San Francisco.

Chicago secured at least a wild card because the four-game series between the Cardinals and Giants makes it impossible for both to catch the Cubs in the standings.

"I'll tell you, if you were in that dugout at the beginning of the game, the guys were dead on their feet," Chicago manager Joe Maddon said. "To play the kind of game we did today — really hot, last game of a long road trip — I give them a ton of credit. [Lester] really played into all that."

The Cardinals remained a half-game behind the New York Mets and one game behind the Giants for the two NL wild cards.

Lester (17-4) allowed four baserunners, none of which got past first. Cubs catcher David Ross threw out two Cardinals trying to steal second and Lester faced just two batters over the minimum.

Cardinals outfielder Brandon Moss called Lester one of the best in the game.

"Today was one of those days where he had both working and he wasn't missing over the middle and he was even throwing some curveballs and change-ups to keep you off of everything," Moss said.

Lester improved to 7-0 with a 1.02 ERA in his last nine starts. He also helped his cause at the plate with an RBI single in the third.

"I'm just trying to give a good at-bat," Lester said. "He elevated a changeup for me and I got it far enough out there to give us a run."

Rizzo's two-run homer in the ninth gave him 31 homers and 101 RBIs on the season. He is the second Cubs left-handed hitter in franchise history to post multiple 30 home run and 100 RBI seasons (Billy Williams did it in 1965, 1970 and 1972).

"Billy Williams, his numbers speak for himself and he's done it so many years, so it's a really good feeling," Rizzo said.

Ross' two-run homer in the fifth snapped

a 0-for-8 streak and it was his first home run since Aug. 17.

St. Louis starter Carlos Martinez (14-8) gave up four runs and eight hits in six innings.

Martinez started off strong, striking out the side in the first and four of the first six batters he faced. Five of his nine strikeouts came on called third strikes. He entered the game having allowed just 12 homers this season and his home run per nine innings average of 0.63 was second in the National League to the Mets' Noah Syndergaard (0.52).

Ross' home run was just third by a right-handed batter against Martinez, who had his four winning decisions streak snapped.

The loss dropped the Cardinals' home record to 33-41, assuring St. Louis of its first losing record at home since 1999 when it played in Busch Stadium II.

While clinching at least a wild card spot is nice, the Cubs look forward to wrapping up the division at home this weekend, preferably tomorrow.

"Let's do it," Maddon said. "The sooner, the better. Then we can make our appropriate plans going forward and really set things up to make our best push."

Kershaw sharp in Dodgers' win over Yanks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — For Clayton Kershaw and the Los Angeles Dodgers, pitching five innings was nearly perfect.

They almost were, too.

Kershaw gave up just one hit in a start twice interrupted by rain, and Justin Turner grounded an RBI double off Dellin Betances in a two-run ninth that sent the Dodgers over the New York Yankees 2-0 Wednesday.

"For us to see Clayton go out and do what he does, it's a huge lift for us," manager Dave Roberts said.

The lefty ace threw 64 pitches in his second start since missing 10 weeks because of a herniated disk in his back. Last week in his return, he gave up two runs and five hits in three innings at Miami.

"Overall, a little bit better, for sure," Kershaw said.

Orioles 1, Red Sox 0: Mark Trumbo hit his major league-leading 42nd home run, Kevin

Gausman outpitched Rick Porcello over eight innings and visiting Baltimore pulled with in a game of AL East-leading Boston.

Zach Britton closed for his 43rd save and Baltimore became the first team to beat Porcello at Fenway Park this season.

Mariners 2, Angels 1: Nelson Cruz and Kyle Seager homered to lead Seattle past host Los Angeles, extending their longest winning streak of the season to eight.

Tigers 9, Twins 6: Miguel Cabrera's homer broke a seventh-inning tie, and host Detroit rallied for a crucial victory.

Nationals 1, Mets 0: Tanner Roark pitched seven spotless innings and Wilson Ramos homered in the seventh inning as Washington beat visiting New York.

Padres 3, Giants 1: Madison Bumgarner missed a chance at his 100th career win and host

San Francisco wasted another opportunity for a potential push in the NL West, getting swept by fourth-place San Diego.

Rays 8, Blue Jays 1: Alex Cobb won for the first time in almost two years, and Kevin Kiermaier and Corey Dickerson each hit a two-run homer to lead visiting Tampa Bay past Toronto.

Astros 8, Rangers 4: Jose Altuve and Alex Bregman both left with injuries, but George Springer and Teoscar Hernandez homered, helping host Houston keep its fading playoff hopes alive.

Indians 6, White Sox 1: Josh Tomlin pitched five effective innings in his return to the Indians rotation, Coco Crisp hit a three-run homer in the sixth inning to break the game open and visiting Cleveland beat Chicago to remain six games ahead of Detroit in the AL Central.

Athletics 8, Royals 0: Yonder Alonso and Marcus Semien

hit two-run doubles as Oakland beat host Kansas City for the third straight game to further ruin the Royals' postseason chances.

Marlins 7, Braves 5: Marcell Ozuna hit a three-run homer and visiting Miami rallied to beat Julio Teheran and Atlanta in a testy game.

Phillies 6, Pirates 2: Freddy Galvis continued his home run surge, hitting his 19th of the season to lead host Philadelphia.

Brewers 7, Reds 0: Junior Guerra pitched six shutout innings, Scooter Gennett and Domingo Santana homered and visiting Milwaukee beat Cincinnati to avoid a three-game sweep.

Diamondbacks 11, Rockies 6: Jean Segura homered twice for the second consecutive game and finished with five hits as host Arizona completed a three-game sweep of Colorado.