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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Coast Guard key in Mideast security

BY CHRIS CHURCH

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — When thinking about military forces operating throughout the Middle East, the U.S. Coast Guard — known by most for its operations around the U.S. — probably doesn't jump to mind.

Yet the Coast Guard, with its focus on patrolling coastal waters and interdicting smugglers, has a key role to play in a region where illicit trafficking in people, drugs and arms is of serious concern.

Patrol Forces Southwest Asia, established in 2002 to support Operation Iraqi Freedom, is the Coast Guard's largest unit outside of the United States. It assists with maritime security operations throughout the Fifth Fleet theater with six patrol boats, shore-side support, an Advanced Interdiction Team and the Maritime Engagement Team.

"The goal in our operations is actually twofold," said Cmdr. Alain Balmaceda, deputy commander of Patrol Forces Southwest Asia. It encompasses "building up the capacity of our partner nations here ... as well as sharing our own tactics with our partner nations to help them provide a stronger force on the water."

Using the Coast Guard's expertise in countering trafficking and visit, board, search and seizure operations, the 12 members of the Maritime Engagement Team participate in about 50 engagements and exercises throughout the year, said Lt. Eric

D. Nielsen, spokesman for Patrol Forces Southwest Asia.

Most engagements last five to 10 days and are a mixture of classroom work and real-life scenarios teaching everything from boarding ships and vessels to searching and seizing illicit substances, said MET supervisor Lt. j.g. Meredith Anderson. They work on both proper procedures and tactics.

They may conduct the engagements in host nation countries using that country's facilities, or they invite partners to work at their own facilities at their warehouse in Bahrain.

Additionally, the MET is responsible for providing operational proficiency training for the other Coast Guard forces in Bahrain, such as the crews of their patrol boats.

"With having unique skill sets like VBSS (visit, board, search and seizure), if you don't practice them, they become perishable," Balmaceda said.

At its warehouse in Bahrain, the MET has realistic engagement facilities. The team's shoot house is known as the "ship-in-the-box." It's a 3,000-square-foot engagement facility that mimics the conditions found on ships. It has ladderwells and hatches and can be arranged in a way to simulate a variety of shipboard spaces.

"It forces you to be in the mind-set of actually being on a ship," Anderson said, "unlike a conventional shoot house."

While clearing spaces of possible threats, teams use Airsoft replica guns to engage and be engaged by opposition forces. The MET

team can further elevate the engagements with Airsoft grenades and other explosives.

During these scenarios, teams are tasked not only with clearing the "Ship-in-the-box" quickly and efficiently but also with determining who is and is not a threat, said MET member Petty Officer 3rd Class Ashton Bush.

One of the advantages of using the Coast Guard for these engagements is that its size and mission sets are more closely in tune with what navies throughout the world do than what the U.S. Navy does, Nielsen said. While the U.S. Navy often projects power forward, regional navies are generally more focused on protecting the waterways along their countries' borders.

"The Coast Guard brings a unique skill set to that, as that's what we typically do in our own service," Balmaceda said.

The Coast Guard team's engagement with partner nations is essential to preparing maritime forces for security operations and ensuring a consistently high standard for all members of the Combined Maritime Forces, said Capt. Tony Aldred of the Royal Australian Navy, director of operations, Combined Maritime Forces.

"The experience gained from working with USCG has been directly applied to numerous significant weapon and narcotics interdictions during the past year," he said.

Congress unable to reach deal on defense budget

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Congress will not finish an annual defense budget bill this month, putting off a decision on a controversial \$18 billion spending hike until after the November election, according to sources familiar with negotiations.

The House and the Senate have broken off negotiations after being unable to reach a deal on the sprawling National Defense Authorization Act, which has become a battleground over the proposal to boost spending for higher pay and more military

hardware, troops and training.

House Republicans are pushing to take the \$18 billion out of the Islamic State group war fund, saying the military is overstressed and needs to invest the money in daily operations. But the Senate has rejected the proposal, which faces strong Democratic opposition and would cause deployed forces to run out of money in April.

The money remains a "significant issue," Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., the ranking member on the Armed Services Committee and a top negotiator of the NDAA bill, told De-

fense News on Thursday.

Several sources close to the negotiations confirmed that work on the bill will not be completed before the current defense budget expires at the end of the month and lawmakers leave Washington to campaign ahead of the coming election.

Any future deal reached by the negotiators named by Congress' two armed services committees still must pass final votes in the House and Senate and must be signed by President Barack Obama, who has threatened to veto the NDAA over the \$18 billion and other issues.

Civilians killed in Syria come home

Associated Press

DENVER — U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter presented flags Friday to the families of two men who never joined the U.S. military — but died fighting the Islamic State group in Syria — after their bodies returned to Colorado on Friday.

The caskets of Levi Shirley, 24, Jordan MacTaggart, 22, along with that of William Savage, 27, arrived Wednesday at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport after a complicated journey back to the U.S.

From there, Shirley and MacTaggart arrived by train in Denver, while Savage was being transported to North Carolina, where his father lives.

In Denver, the bodies were delivered to their sobbing loved ones in plain, gray caskets. A team of pallbearers unloaded the caskets from an Amtrak train and lifted them into hearses as sleepy passengers watched curiously.

"Though they did not fight as

members of our armed forces, they are Americans, and as Americans, we have a responsibility to bring these young men home and to give the families relief and closure," Perlmutter said in a statement.

The men died separately in combat after joining the People's Protection Units, the main Kurdish group battling the Islamic State group in Syria.

Turkey's tense relationship with the Kurds and the U.S. since July's failed coup stalled efforts to bring the men home.

Kurdish groups determined it would be too dangerous to repatriate the bodies of Shirley, MacTaggart and Savage through Turkey and instead shipped them hundreds of miles east to Iraq. The bodies were then flown to Amman, Jordan, and on to Chicago.

Susan Shirley said she worked with the State Department to bring her son's body home, and her friends contacted Perlmutter to help navigate

the frustrating terrain.

He enlisted aid from people at the White House.

Susan Shirley said her son was in Syria "as an American to protect Americans."

But unlike fallen members of the armed forces, the young men had no military escorts to accompany their caskets and no 21-gun salute.

Veterans groups said they had no problems with the honors planned for the three men.

"They went to fight for the right side," said Joe Davis, spokesman for the national Veterans of Foreign Wars. "You can't fault a state for honoring their own."

Shirley, of Arvada, Colo., was killed by a land mine July 14. MacTaggart, of Castle Rock, Colo., died Aug. 3 while fighting in a squad that included two Americans and a Swede in Manbij, Syria.

Savage, of St. Mary's County, Md., also died in Manbij on Aug. 10.

Donation drive begins for robbed WWII vet

By TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Army Staff Sgt. Dennis Ferk was wounded three times fighting in World War II, and now he needs some help after being bilked out of his life savings.

The 95-year-old resident of Santa Fe, N.M., was physically threatened and robbed of \$340,000 by two people who were supposed to be his caretakers after his wife died.

A church friend of Ferk's set up a GoFundMe webpage this week to raise money for the elderly veteran. The site had received \$525 toward its \$50,000 goal as of Thursday, a day after it was created.

Ferk reached out to Martinez when he learned his gas was about to be shut off, and he was behind on his utility payments, which were supposed to be handled by the man and woman who had taken control of Ferk's finances.

Gil Martinez, a member of the veteran's parish who came to his aid, said he built evidence against the two caretakers — Dian Zeemin, 69, and Joe Rosko, 62, — who were living in Ferk's guest house and police issued warrants for their arrest at the end of July.

The two caretakers are suspected of taking out a dozen credit cards in Ferk's name and running up tens of thousands of dollars in charges, trying to take out loans on Ferk's house and cashing out some of his life insurance policies, according to the New Mexican newspaper.

Ferk received three Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars and two presidential citations for his World War II service, according to Martinez.

Anyone who wants to make a donation to help Ferk can go to the GoFundMe page: <https://www.gofundme.com/2t6usmde>.

Rising sea levels to affect military

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Rising sea levels caused by climate change will present serious risks to military readiness, operations and strategy as America's coastal installations become inundated, according to a report by a panel of retired military officers.

Among the recommendations made in "Sea Level Rise and the U.S. Military's Mission," released this week by The Center for Climate and Security, is a call to integrate climate-impact scenarios into the Department of Defense's regular planning cycles.

The panel, comprising five retired flag officers represents all the services.

The report synthesized recent studies conducted by the DOD, Congress and independent researchers, and analyzed

what those findings mean for the U.S. military.

Recent research has found low-lying and exposed areas that contain coastal U.S. bases will be significantly affected.

As early as 2050, some low-lying bases along the U.S. East and Gulf coasts could be submerged 10 percent to 25 percent of the year.

Sea-level rise could affect military readiness by swamping coastal installations crucial for support and logistical operations. Operations could be affected by reducing usable land for training and testing.

U.S. military strategy will have to deal with increased instability in overseas regions affected by rising seas and increasing frequency and intensity of severe weather, the report said.

The report highlighted Hampton Roads in Virginia,

which former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta described as "the greatest concentration of military might in the world." The area, which is vulnerable to sea-level rise and storm surge, is home to Allied Command Transformation, Joint Forces Command, Fleet Forces Command, Air Combat Command, Marine Corps Forces Command and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.

The panel called on policymakers to bolster the DOD's capacity to address strategic climate-change risks. The DOD and the Coast Guard should include current and projected climate impact analyses into regular maintenance and upgrade planning for installations, it recommended.

Also, climate-related decisions should be made only in light of the highest-risk projections, the study said.

US to shift military resources to Syria

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military will have to shift surveillance aircraft from other regions and increase the number of intelligence analysts to coordinate attacks with Russia under the Syria cease-fire deal partly in order to target militants the U.S. has largely spared, senior officials say.

Senior defense and military officials told The Associated Press that they are sorting out how the U.S.-Russia military partnership will take shape and how that will change where U.S. equipment and people will be deployed. They said, however, that they will need to take assets from other parts of the world, because U.S. military leaders don't want to erode the current U.S.-led coalition campaign against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

More military planners and targeting experts will be needed to identify and approve airstrikes against the al-Qaida-linked Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. The U.S. has rarely bombed the group, previously known as the Nusra Front, and the targeting is trickier because the militants are often intermingled with other U.S.-backed Syrian rebels.

Making matters more complicated are U.S. military concerns about Russian targeting. Unlike the U.S., which uses precision-guided munitions, Moscow has predominantly used so-called

Clashes threaten fragile truce

The Washington Post

ISTANBUL — Clashes erupted Friday between Syrian rebels and government forces just outside Damascus, state media and activists said, puncturing days of calm under a cease-fire brokered by Russia and the United States.

The battles did not appear to seriously threaten the truce nor to immediately spark wider unrest. But the fighting between Syrian troops and anti-government rebels in the Damascus suburb of Jobar underscored the fragile hold of the cease-fire since it took effect Monday.

The violence comes as the United Nations has stalled in its efforts to bring aid to besieged civilians while the truce is in effect. The cease-fire deal was struck to allow aid agencies to reach besieged populations, in the city Aleppo and other areas, including embattled sites near Damascus.

The battles Friday, howev-

er, were the fiercest reported since the cease-fire began.

The state news agency, SANA, said militants attempted to launch raids on military checkpoints near the capital. The army responded with a counteroffensive, the agency said.

Rebels, however, claimed Syrian troops attacked the area first, including a three-pronged assault that began in the early morning.

"The regime forces tried to advance under the cover of tanks and mortars," said Muhammad Abu Yaman, an activist with the opposition-aligned Jobar Media Center. "We never believed in the truce because we never trusted the regime."

It was not possible to independently verify the accounts. But both rebel factions and the Syrian government are part of the cease-fire effort, and the clashes highlighted the challenges facing the cease-fire's broader objectives.

The concerns reflect the U.S. military's broader skepticism about partnering with Russia, which it says it distrusts.

Senior U.S. defense and military officials familiar with the planning spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to talk about the matter publicly.

Under the deal, if the cease-fire holds for seven days and humanitarian deliveries are allowed into areas besieged by the Syrian army, the U.S. and Russia would set up a so-called Joint Implementation Center to focus on the militants and share basic targeting data.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner acknowledged the skepticism.

"I don't think that anyone in the U.S. government is necessarily taking at face value Russia's or certainly not the Syrian regime's commitment to this arrangement," Toner said. "I also think some of the comments from the Department of Defense were just about speaking to the fact that there's logistical challenges of setting up the JIC (joint center) and coordinating these airstrikes, and that's going to require additional effort and additional time."

He added, however, "What really matters here is that the president of the United States supports this agreement, and our system of government works in such a way that everyone follows what the president says."

N. Korea: Ready to launch attack against 'provocations'

By KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea says it's ready to launch another attack against "provocations" by the United States.

The statement came after the U.S. flew two supersonic B-1B bombers over South Korea on Tuesday in a show of force and warned it would act to defend the peninsula.

Washington and Seoul also have called on the U.N. Security Council to take swift action

to implement new sanctions against the North following its Sept. 9 underground blast.

North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho reiterated his country's insistence that its nuclear weapons program was for self-defense, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

"North Korea is ready to launch another attack in defiance of the provocations by the United States," he was quoted as saying Thursday during a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Venezuela.

He did not elaborate.

South Korea's Ministry of National Defense has said it believes the North has the ability to conduct another nuclear test in an unused tunnel at its main testing complex.

The latest nuclear test was the most powerful of the five conducted since 2006. That and a series of missile tests this year have raised fears that North Korea is making faster-than-expected progress with its weapons programs.

Experts have said the com-

munist country is still years away from developing a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile that could reach the U.S. mainland.

The response to the growing threat from North Korea is expected to be a major focus on the sidelines of next week's U.N. General Assembly.

Secretary of State John Kerry will meet with his South Korean and Japanese counterparts to discuss the issue Sunday in New York, the State Department said.

Clinton back on campaign trail after break for illness

Associated Press

GREENSBORO, N.C. — Back on the campaign trail, a reflective Hillary Clinton said Thursday her three-day, doctor-mandated break gave her new perspective on why she's running to be president. She vowed to close her campaign against Donald Trump by giving Americans "something to vote for, not just against."

Clinton made no apologies for keeping her pneumonia diagnosis from the public until a video emerged showing her stumbling and being supported by aides. She also repeatedly sidestepped questions about when her running mate Tim Kaine was informed.

An upbeat Clinton walked onstage at a rally in North Carolina to James Brown's song, "I Feel Good." She said that while sitting at home this week was "pretty much the last place I wanted to be," the time helped clarify how she wants to close her campaign against Trump.

"We're offering ideas, not insults," she said in a jab at her Republican rival. "A plan that will make a real difference in

people's lives, not prejudice and paranoia."

The rally marked Clinton's first public appearance since Sunday, when she abruptly left a 9/11 memorial service after getting dizzy and dehydrated. She had been diagnosed with pneumonia Friday, but the campaign informed the public only after the video of an ill Clinton emerged.

With two months until Election Day, the race between Clinton and Trump is far tighter than many in both parties expected. Clinton continues to be dragged down by voters' mistrust, but she still maintains more pathways than Trump to the 270 Electoral College votes needed to win the White House.

Clinton's confidence in the electoral map was underscored in her decision to make her first stop this week in North Carolina, the only battleground state President Barack Obama lost in 2012. Trump almost certainly needs to carry the state in order to win the White House, while Clinton's team is eager to block his path.

Man wielding meat cleaver shot, wounded by NYC police

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A man who was shot by police on a crowded New York City street after he struck an off-duty detective with a meat cleaver initially was stopped because he was trying to remove an immobilizing boot from a vehicle that he was apparently living in, authorities said.

The shooting happened about a block from Macy's department store and Madison Square Garden about 5 p.m. Thursday, just as rush hour was getting underway.

Police said the confrontation began when two uniformed officers encountered Akram Joudeh, 32, trying to remove the boot from a parked vehicle.

As the officers approached him, Joudeh pulled out an 11-inch meat cleaver and ran, police said. A group of officers chased him and at one point shot him with a Taser, with no apparent effect.

Officers chased Joudeh down the street. An off-duty police detective tried to tackle him. That's when Joudeh lashed out with the knife, hacking the face of the detective, said the department's Chief James O'Neill. Officers then opened fire.

Police fired 18 shots, striking Joudeh at least twice. He was hospitalized Thursday night in critical but stable condition, police said. The detective was being treated for a 6-inch gash from his temple to his jaw.

Economists: Trump's plan an impossible mix

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump has attached a price tag to an economic vision promising what many economists say is impossible: lower taxes, a dramatic expansion in some federal programs and a slimmer government running a smaller deficit.

In a speech Thursday to the Economic Club of New York, Trump said that his plan — a mix of tax cuts, regulation elimination and new spending — would reduce the nation's tax burden by \$4.4 trillion over 10 years and would create 25 million new jobs.

Trump and his advisers say that would lead to booming economic growth of as much as 4 percent per year, which would make up for most of that lost tax revenue along with an infusion of new money from trade, energy and regulatory reforms.

The rest would come from almost \$1 trillion in spending cuts made during the next decade, which Trump would accomplish by cutting one penny from every dollar from certain segments of the government each year.

"My plan will embrace the truth that people flourish under a minimum government burden and will tap into the incredible, unrealized potential of our workers and their dreams," Trump said.

For Trump's plans to succeed, they would have to overcome forces in the economy, such as rising automation, an aging population and low-wage competition overseas, that have led even conservative economists to call 4 percent growth an improbable goal.

The U.S. economy is already creating 2.5 million jobs per year, the same pace promised by Trump during the next decade.

Earlier in his campaign, Trump proposed a \$10 trillion tax cut over 10 years that was so large and costly that several Republican economists laughed when asked about it. He later

tacked on a series of spending proposals that promised even larger deficits, including a push against illegal immigration that analysts estimated could cost up to \$600 billion, a \$500 billion investment in the nation's infrastructure and a vow to restore \$450 billion of existing cuts in military spending.

"Trump took the budgetary criticism seriously, and made a case that it actually adds up," said Douglas Holtz-Eakin, who was John McCain's economic policy director in the 2008 campaign and now is president of the American Action Forum.

Holtz-Eakin said that Trump's economic plans are now roughly equivalent to those of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, at least in scope, namely by proposing several ambitious initiatives and making a plausible, though not necessarily conclusive, argument on how to pay for them.

Others say Trump's plans are far shakier.

Marc Goldwein, the senior policy director of the non-partisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, said Trump is "relying on very rosy economic assumptions that I don't think are going to come to fruition."

The economy is currently expected to grow by roughly 2 percent per year, and economists say Trump's proposed restrictions on immigration would be among the many things hampering his ability to double that rate of expansion.

If growth remains around a more realistic 2 percent, Goldwein said, Trump's plan would add roughly \$5 trillion to the nation's debt. Though Clinton's tax hikes could slow the nation's growth, he said, they'd pay for far more of her spending proposals and would lead to a deficit a tenth the size of Trump's.

Trump also vowed Thursday not to cut defense spending and to exempt Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid from any reductions. Those programs make up two-thirds of the federal budget.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Pizza man loses bet, dons bikini bottoms

NJ TOMS RIVER — The punishment for a New Jersey pizza man who finished last in his fantasy football league included a public walk of shame and a women's swimsuit.

Angelo Boemio, 42, marched down a roadway in Toms River wearing only pink bikini bottoms and sneakers while hoisting a sign signifying his fantasy football misfortune.

The pizzeria owner strolled along Route 9 for 10 minutes on Labor Day, bringing hilarity and horror to passers-by.

Boemio told the New York Post that people honked their horns, and a woman with four children in her minivan drove back and forth five times as the kids laughed.

Camel, teen driver collide on rural road

AL SARDIS — Far from the desert, a teenage driver collided with a camel on an Alabama road, injuring the driver and the animal.

Sardis Police Chief James Harp told The Gadsden Times that the camel's owner was leading it across the road when the crash happened.

The police chief said camel owner Terry Turk waved his arms to get the driver's attention and leaped out of the way to avoid the car. But the camel crashed onto the hood, showering glass onto the driver, who was treated for minor injuries including cuts.

The chief said the camel had to be euthanized.

Police: Woman made threat to halt urine test

FL WINTER HAVEN — Police said a Florida woman made a bomb threat

in an attempt to keep her boyfriend from submitting a urine sample at a probation office.

Winter Haven police said Deniz Martinez, 31, called 911 on Tuesday, saying a man outside the office was going to "blow the building up."

Investigators determined the cellphone number belonged to Martinez, who drove her boyfriend Jason Drake, 38, to the office earlier Tuesday. Officials said he wasn't able to provide the urine sample and was required to stay until he submitted a sufficient sample.

Officers said they tracked down Martinez, and she acknowledged making the call. She was charged with making a false report about a bomb.

Drake was arrested, accused of a probation violation.

Man accused of mailing carcasses

IN BROWNSTOWN — A southern Indiana man passed over for a coaching and teaching position allegedly mailed four dead skunks and a dead raccoon to the successful applicant, court documents said.

Travis Tarrants, 40, allegedly began harassing the applicant because he was chosen over Tarrants for a basketball coaching position and fourth-grade teaching job at the Springs Valley School Corp., WISH-TV reported.

One of the packages intercepted at a post office contained a dead raccoon and a message that said, "Resign! It Will Not Stop," documents said.

Investigators also believe Tarrants placed phone calls to the Indiana Department of Child Services, making claims the man was having sex with an underage student and sexually abusing the daughter of an acquaintance.

Both victims received voice-

mail messages threatening to kill the man's fiancée and her baby.

Dinosaur at miniature golf course saved

MA SAUGUS — The 20-foot orange dinosaur seen by thousands of motorists a day on a Massachusetts highway has been saved from extinction.

Some feared the dinosaur would disappear because the miniature golf course where it stood since 1958 was sold to a developer who plans on building apartments, a hotel and retail space.

Project partner Michael Barsamian told The Daily Item of Lynn that he bought the roadside kitsch and plans on installing it next to the new hotel. He said the dinosaur is like Boston's Citgo sign.

A woman whose family owned the mini golf course said she had several inquiries about purchasing the dinosaur and is glad it's staying close.

Bride hitchhikes to wedding after limo fails

NH BROOKLINE — After waiting 11 years to marry her groom, a flat tire wasn't going to stop a determined New Hampshire bride from walking down the aisle on her special day.

With her limo rendered inoperable along an infrequently traveled road in Brookline, Angeliqe Arsenault stuck out her thumb and hitchhiked to the wedding venue on Saturday.

Arsenault said her bridal party just laughed after receiving word of the flat tire from their driver.

With confidence fueled by champagne, Arsenault, in her white dress, was able to flag down a passing motorist who

gladly helped get her to the altar — albeit 30 minutes late.

Despite the small hiccup, Arsenault said the rest of her wedding was "amazing," and she now has a story her family will remember forever.

Authorities: Man broke into jail for help

OH HAMILTON — Police said a man looking for protection ran into an Ohio jail and became trapped in the facility.

Authorities said Chad Saylor, 23, breached the Butler County Resolutions facility in Hamilton on Saturday by climbing a pipe and becoming trapped in the rear of the facility. Police said he then called 911, saying people were trying to kill him, and he needed to get to safety.

Saylor had active warrants and was taken into custody. He wasn't seriously injured.

Train derails marathon for some runners

PA ALLENTOWN — An ill-timed, slow-moving train in Pennsylvania derailed some runners' dreams of competing in the next Boston Marathon.

The Lehigh Valley Health Network Via Marathon was underway Sunday when a train crossed the race course near Allentown, stopping some runners for minutes.

The Boston Athletic Association said it cannot accept adjusted race times. Only the official times recorded Sunday will count for determining which participants qualified for the Boston Marathon.

Via Marathon officials said they had received assurances a freight train would not affect the race, and apologized to runners.

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Concerns mount after Bills' 0-2 start

By JOHN WAWROW

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — One week the Buffalo Bills offense is sputtering. The next it's their defense.

That leaves coach Rex Ryan having plenty of concerns he needs to address two weeks into his second season in Buffalo.

"Well, first off, obviously never expected this," Ryan said, opening his news conference following a 37-31 loss to the New York Jets on Thursday night. "The Jets were a much better team than we were today, especially their offense against our defense. It looked like a mismatch."

Ryan's prized defense — the one he vowed would be much improved over last year — was porous.

The Bills surrendered 493 yards offense, 28 first downs, allowed New York to convert eight of 13 third-down chances and forced just two punts — the second with 10 seconds left. The only bright side was safety Nickell Robey-Coleman returning Jalin Marshall's fumble 36 yards for a touchdown to briefly put the Bills ahead 24-20.

The Jets responded to score 17 consecutive points, capped by Matt Forte's third touchdown on a 12-yard run.

Buffalo is 0-2 for the first time since 2010.

And the loss to the Jets comes a week after the Bills' offense managed just 160 yards in a 13-7 loss at Baltimore.

The offense was much improved, with Tyrod Taylor going 18-for-30 for 297 yards

and three TDs.

What's troubling is the Bills' schedule doesn't get much easier. Buffalo hosts Arizona on Sept. 25, followed by a game at New England, where the Bills are 1-14 since 2001.

"Well right now it looks daunting against anybody," Ryan said. "We've got to get better, so we've got to look at the tape and realize it starts with us."

Starting cornerback Stephon Gilmore had a particularly tough day as part of a defensive backfield that allowed Eric Decker to make six catches for 126 yards and Brandon Marshall six for 101.

"It wasn't one of my best days," Gilmore said. "But I'm not the person to put my head down. I know I have to step up and make those plays, so I'll do that."

The Jets (1-1) snapped a five-game skid against Buffalo, which included a 22-17 season-ending loss in January that eliminated New York from the playoffs.

New York also avoided its first 0-2 start since 2007.

Forte on the run: Forte had 30 carries for 100 yards and matched a career-high and franchise record by becoming the 13th running back to score three touchdowns rushing. In two games, offseason free-agent addition has combined for 52 carries for 196 yards and added seven catches for 68 yards.

"I don't care," Forte said when told he's on pace for 450 touches. "As long as we keep winning, I don't care if I have 1,000 touches."

Catching on: Eric Decker and Brandon Marshall re-established themselves as one of the NFL's top receiving tandems. Decker led New York with six catches for 126 yards and a touchdown, while Marshall had six catches for 101 yards. Marshall avoided a scare when he briefly left the game in the second quarter with what appeared to be a serious left knee injury.

He missed only four plays spanning two series after having his knee examined.

"I thought it was over. I thought I was going to be fishing in my backyard in Florida," said Marshall, whose left knee twisted awkwardly beneath him when cornerback Stephon Gilmore pulled him down by his facemask.

Going deep: With an 84-yard touchdown pass to Marquise Goodwin and a 71-yard TD pass to Greg Salas, Taylor became Buffalo's fifth quarterback to throw two touchdowns of 70-yards or longer in the same game. JP Losman was the last to do that in 2006.

Goodwin's touchdown was the longest by a Buffalo player in a home game.

Watkins watch: Bills receiver Sammy Watkins started despite experiencing soreness in his surgically repaired left foot this past week. He had two catches for 20 yards.

Fitz-magic: Jets Quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick went 24-for-34 for 374 yards and a touchdown with no interceptions. He bounced back after combining for four TDs and five interceptions — including three in the season finale — in two games against Buffalo, his former team, last year.

Vikings welcome Rodgers, Packers to new stadium

By DAVE CAMPBELL

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS—Following a decade-plus of lobbying and 2 years of construction, the Minnesota Vikings have arrived at the grand opening of their new stadium, with the Green Bay Packers serving as the fitting visitors on the national stage of a Sunday night game.

The Vikings will unveil yet another starting quarterback in the history of this rivalry, too, a series controlled by the Packers since Aaron Rodgers assumed the signal-caller's role. Rodgers has extended what's been a remarkable run of stability and success at the sport's most vital position dating to the dawn of Brett Favre's career.

"We're obviously blessed," said Packers coach Mike McCarthy, who overlapped with Favre's final two seasons in Green Bay and is 15-5-1 against Minnesota since taking the job in 2006. McCarthy added: "I'm sure they kiss their mothers every chance they get."

Favre, the newly minted member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and Rodgers, the two-time NFL Most Valuable Player, have made the Packers the envy of the league, let alone of the Vikings, for nearly 25 years. Their elite ability has been supplemented by exceptional durability, further underscored by the devastating knee injury that knocked Minnesota quarterback Teddy

Bridgewater out for the season and maybe longer.

"Hopefully I can ride this out a little longer and then pass along to the next guy who's going to go on a run like Brett and I have," said Rodgers, who has begun his ninth year as the starter with only nine games missed.

Here are some key angles to know about the game:

More misses: Blair Walsh, who famously missed the 27-yard field goal that would've sent the Vikings to the next round of the playoffs last season, had an extra point in the opener sail wide right, and two field goals hook wide left. Walsh made one extra point and four field goals to fuel a 25-16 victory over Tennessee, but

he could've given the Vikings seven more points.

Corner concern: The Packers held cornerback Sam Shields out of practices this week because of concussion symptoms after getting hurt at Jacksonville. Rookie backup Josh Hawkins has been unavailable due to a hamstring injury. Backup safety Micah Hyde can switch to cornerback, but depth could be an issue.

Corner concern, part two: The Vikings played their opener without cornerback Xavier Rhodes, whose knee injury kept him out of practices this week, too. Trae Waynes stepped in and was targeted often by Titans quarterback Marcus Mariota, with mixed results in coverage.

No. 6 Houston pulls away from Cincinnati

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Greg Ward Jr. threw an interception in the end zone. Cincinnati responded by going down the field, getting a touchdown and grabbing the lead and the momentum.

For the first time this season, No. 6 Houston was on the road and feeling the pressure. How would the Cougars respond?

Ward ran for two fourth-quarter touchdowns, and the Cougars' fabulous defense returned a couple of interceptions for touchdowns as they pulled away to a 40-16 victory over Cincinnati on Thursday night.

"The fourth quarter exemplified a veteran team that's played in big games," coach Tom Herman said. "They go down and score and we come back and take the lead."

Nobody was under the spotlight more than Ward, who sat out a 42-0 victory over Lamar on Saturday because of a sore shoulder. He came through pregame warmups without an issue, and got treatment on the

sideline between series.

"They were keeping my shoulder warm on the sideline," Ward said. "It tends to get tight. I was thankful to be out there."

The Cougars (3-0, 1-0 American Athletic) trailed 16-12 early in the fourth quarter before Ward and the defense took over.

Ward dispelled any worries about his arm with a 39-yard touchdown pass on the Cougars' second series. He was 24 of 36 for 326 yards with two interceptions, and he ran 26 times for 73 yards.

"We put in a defense just for him, some guys that were faster," Cincinnati coach Tommy Tuberville said. "We did a good job in pass coverage and he'd just pull it down and run. That's hard to defend."

Houston's defense took away any semblance of a running game from Cincinnati (2-1, 0-1) and accounted for 16 points on its own — a safety and the two interception returns by Steven Taylor and Howard Wilson.

The Cougars haven't allowed any of their last five opponents

to rush for 100 yards. Cincinnati managed only 30 yards rushing, putting too much pressure on redshirt sophomore Hayden Moore, whose two fourth-quarter interceptions allowed the Cougars to pull away.

Moore had never faced a defense so good. He made an impact early with a 61-yard touchdown pass, but the lack of a running game was tough to overcome. Moore finished 21-for-37 for 275 yards with two touchdowns, two interceptions and three sacks.

"You can't beat any good team if you can't run the football," Tuberville said. "They put all the pressure on our quarterback and receivers and they dictated the game to us."

The takeaway

Houston: Oh that defense. The Cougars didn't need to get a lot out of their offense — and Ward wasn't at his best — in order to win a tough league game on the road. That's another good sign in a season that opened with a 33-23 win over Oklahoma.

"It was ugly for a long time," Herman said. "I think we'll be OK if we can take care of the self-inflicted wounds."

Cincinnati: The Bearcats have been overly reliant on a pass-heavy offense the last two years. The defense's showing on Thursday was encouraging — it simply wore down. The defense also looked solid during a 38-20 win at Purdue on Saturday, coming up with five interceptions.

"We got a little tired at the end," Tuberville said. "The defense was out there forever."

Poll implications

Houston: The Cougars have their highest ranking since they were No. 3 in 1990. Any chance to move up? The top three teams in the poll — Alabama, Florida State, Ohio State — all play road games against ranked teams this week, while Michigan and Clemson are at home.

Cincinnati: The Bearcats got one vote in this week's poll, and did nothing to suggest they deserve more.

ACC showdown: No. 2 FSU travels to No. 10 Louisville

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The 10th-ranked Louisville Cardinals insist they're preparing for No. 2 Florida State like any other opponent. That doesn't mean they're downplaying the importance of their biggest test to date.

Louisville (2-0, 1-0 Atlantic Coast Conference) hosts the Seminoles (2-0, 0-0) on Saturday in one of the program's biggest games. More challenges remain for both schools — including games against defending ACC champion and preseason favorite No. 5 Clemson — but the winner of this nationally televised showdown can take a major step in the Atlantic Division.

"We knew that if we were going to make a run in this conference or get to the goal that we want, we had to find a

way to beat them," Louisville coach Bobby Petrino said. "We are looking forward to the matchup."

Adding more intrigue are two dynamic quarterbacks who have shown they can dominate games.

Louisville dual-threat sophomore Lamar Jackson has shown he can win with his arm and legs with 1,015 yards and 13 touchdowns (seven passing) in the nation's top offense (754 yards per game). He's coming off an ACC-record 610-yard offensive performance at Syracuse that included a highlight-reel leap over a defender for a TD along with 72-yard scores running and passing.

Florida State's offense is just as explosive (509 yards) and features redshirt freshman Deondre Francois, who has passed for 681 yards and

five TDs. Francois' 419 yards passing and two scores helped the Seminoles erase a 28-6 first-quarter deficit with 33 unanswered points that beat then-No. 11 Mississippi 45-34.

Some other things to watch as Florida State visits Louisville:

Protect and support: Jackson's running has overshadowed performances by other Louisville rushers who figure to contribute in multiple ways against FSU. Brandon Radcliff had a career-best 156 yards rushing at Syracuse with a 48-yard TD run on 10 carries, while Jeremy Smith and L.J. Scott have turned swing passes out of the backfield into TDs. Not only do they provide additional targets for Jackson, they can also block. "There's going to be more of us involved in the pass protection game," Radcliff said, "but that's nothing new."

Eliminate big plays: Florida State has already allowed 11 pass plays of 20 yards or more. Safety Derwin James is out for an extended period after having surgery to repair a torn meniscus. Senior Nate Andrews, who missed the first two games due to a calf injury, is likely to return this week and would move into James' spot. Sophomore corners Tavarus McFadden and Marcus Lewis are expected to get challenged early.

Special dividends: Florida State's special teams have exceeded expectations early. Freshman kicker Ricky Aguayo has made all seven field-goal attempts while punter Logan Tyler leads the ACC at 46.8 yards per punt. The return game has also been solid with Jesus Wilson returning a punt 89 yards last week, FSU's first punt return TD since 2012.

Cubs lose, clinch NL Central anyway

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Wrigley Field was dark and empty when a loud cheer reverberated throughout the neighborhood surrounding the iconic ballpark.

While the Chicago Cubs decided to delay their party, their long-downtrodden fans were ready to celebrate.

Chicago wasted its first chance to clinch the NL Central title when pinch-hitter Scooter Gennett delivered a tiebreaking, two-run double in the seventh inning Thursday night, leading the Milwaukee Brewers to a 5-4 victory. But St. Louis' 6-2 loss at San Francisco completed the Cubs' season-long dominance of the division.

It appeared manager Joe Maddon and his players were long gone when the West Coast game wrapped up. But the final out in San Francisco touched off a celebration in Chicago that included honking horns and chanting in the streets.

"This is just the first step," Maddon said before the Car-

dinals lost. "I mean, we have much larger baseball fish to fry in our skillet."

The Cubs (93-53) were hoping to begin a 10-game homestand with a boozy celebration of their first division title since 2008. But Keon Broxton homered and Orlando Arcia drove in two runs for Milwaukee, making Chicago wait a little while longer.

Jorge Soler hit a two-run homer for the Cubs, who had won three of four.

Now the party shifts to Friday, right after the Cubs' afternoon start against the Brewers. It might be a bit anticlimactic for Maddon and Co., but they took all the drama out of the division race long ago.

Led by a stellar pitching staff and MVP contenders Kris Bryant and Anthony Rizzo, Chicago got off to a sizzling 25-6 start. After stumbling into the All-Star break, the Cubs pulled away with a 22-6 August that turned the NL Central race into a mere formality.

But the division title is not

how this group of Cubs will be judged, not this year. After running roughshod over the rest of the majors for most of the season, they are trying to end the franchise's famous championship drought that goes all the way back to when the Cubs beat the Tigers in the 1908 World Series.

"We've got a lot ahead of us. We really do," president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said before the loss to Milwaukee. "It kind of all boils down to how you perform in October."

It's only the fourth time the Cubs have reached the postseason in consecutive seasons. They got in as a wild card last year and made it to the NL Championship Series before they were swept by the New York Mets.

The offseason additions of Ben Zobrist and Jason Heyward only added to the anticipation for the Cubs' loyal fan base, and they have delivered up until this point. But many

of those same fans also were around for the last division title, when the 2008 Cubs won 97 games and then were swept by the Dodgers in the division series.

"There's no team I'd rather be going into October with," Epstein said. "But there are never favorites in October the same way there are in the regular season."

Mike Montgomery pitched six solid innings before being replaced by Justin Grimm in the seventh, when the Brewers put runners on first and third with one out. Gennett, batting for Jimmy Nelson (8-14), blooped an 0-2 curveball into the corner in left for a 5-3 Milwaukee lead.

The Cubs got one back on Heyward's RBI double in the eighth, but Tyler Thornburg threw a called third strike past pinch-hitter Willson Contreras with runners at the corners to end the inning.

Thornburg also worked the ninth for his 10th save in 15 chances.

Giants hold off Cardinals, gain ground on Dodgers

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Fist-pumping Johnny Cueto pitched a five-hitter and retired his final 17 batters as San Francisco gained ground in the playoff race with a 6-2 victory over St. Louis.

Hunter Pence hit a two-run homer, Cueto (16-5) had a go-ahead sacrifice fly and Angel Pagan followed with an RBI single. Denard Span added a two-run single.

The Giants gained a game on the NL West-leading Los Angeles Dodgers, who are ahead by four after losing at Arizona.

San Francisco also moved a game in front of the idle New York Mets and two up on the Cardinals in the chase for the two NL wild cards.

Cueto struck out seven and walked one in his fifth complete game, tying Chris Sale of

the White Sox for most in the majors.

Cueto threw 105 pitches and beat Adam Wainwright (11-9) a day after the Giants were swept by San Diego in a lackluster three-game series.

Rays 7, Orioles 6: Evan Longoria homered and drove in five runs, and last-place Tampa Bay again played spoiler in a victory over host Baltimore.

The loss dropped the Orioles two games behind AL East-leading Boston and into a tie with Toronto atop the wild-card race.

Tampa Bay has won three straight, including the last two of a three-game series in Toronto. The Rays also defeated the wild card-contending Yankees on Sunday.

Blue Jays 7, Angels 2: Josh Donaldson went 3-for-3 with two doubles and scored two runs in his return to the lineup,

Russell Martin hit a three-run homer and visiting Toronto beat Los Angeles.

The Blue Jays remained two games behind first-place Boston in the AL East. They are tied with Baltimore atop the wild-card standings.

Diamondbacks 7, Dodgers 3: Mitch Haniger hit a three-run homer in a five-run sixth inning, and host Arizona beat NL West-leading Los Angeles.

Athletics 14, Royals 5: Stephen Vogt homered and drove in five runs, Ryon Healy hit a mammoth three-run shot and Oakland routed visiting Kansas City.

The Athletics put a huge dent in the Royals' diminishing playoff chances, sweeping a four-game road series at Kansas City for the first time. The A's outscored the Royals 43-12, the largest Oakland run

differential in a four-game series in franchise history.

Pirates 15, Phillies 2: Andrew McCutchen hit two solo homers, Chad Kuhl pitched six effective innings and visiting Pittsburgh beat Philadelphia.

Twins 5, Tigers 1: Brian Dozier's two-run single highlighted a four-run second inning, and Minnesota handed host Detroit a crucial loss.

White Sox 2, Indians 1: Jose Abreu extended his hitting tear with a home run and a single, and Carlos Sanchez singled home the winning run in the ninth inning to lift Chicago over visiting Cleveland.

The White Sox took three of four games in the series to conclude a 6-4 homestand against three playoff hopefuls. The first-place Indians remained six games ahead of Detroit in the AL Central.