

BRIEFLY

**No more menthol cigarettes:
New ban on tobacco, vape flavors**

BOSTON (AP) — Massachusetts became the first state to ban flavored tobacco and nicotine vaping products, including menthol cigarettes, after Republican Gov. Charlie Baker signed into law on Wednesday a bill that's meant to reduce the appeal of the products to young people amid a rash of illnesses and deaths linked to vaping.

Anti-smoking groups hailed the ban, which restricts sale and consumption of flavored vaping products immediately and does the same for menthol cigarettes starting June 1, 2020.

"The Massachusetts law is a major milestone in the fight to reverse the worsening e-cigarette epidemic and stop tobacco companies from targeting and addicting kids with flavored products," said Matthew Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

But the New England Convenience Store and Energy Marketers Association, which opposed the legislation, said it's exploring challenging the new law in court, or seeking other ways to change it.

Sheriff: Marine deserter captured at Virginia murder scene

ROANOKE, Va. (AP) — A Marine deserter wanted in the fatal shooting of his mother's boyfriend was captured Wednesday after a weekslong, multistate manhunt that had schools and neighborhoods on alert in southwest Virginia.

Michael Alexander Brown, 22, was arrested inside his mother's home, the same place where the killing happened nearly three weeks ago, Sheriff W. Q. "Bill" Overton Jr. said at a press conference. Brown was taken into custody "without incident" and appeared to be in "fine" condition, Overton said.

Brown is charged with second-degree murder in the fatal shooting of Rodney Wilfred Brown, who authorities have described as his mother's boyfriend.

The Marine's mother told investigators she witnessed the crime and named her son as the suspect, according to a criminal complaint filed in U.S. District Court. She also identified the getaway vehicle, which was later found in South Carolina, hours southwest of Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, where her son had been stationed.

Hawaii suspect faces hearing in cyberstalking of Utah family

HONOLULU (AP) — A Hawaii man tormented a Utah family for over a year by sending more than 500 people to their house for unwanted services including food deliveries, repairs, tow trucks, locksmiths, plumbers and prostitutes, according to a U.S. prosecutor who called it "extreme cyberstalking."

Loren Okamura is scheduled for a detention hearing Wednesday afternoon in Honolulu's federal courthouse following his arrest last week. He was indicted last month on charges of cyberstalking, interstate threats and transporting people for prostitution, court documents show.

Okamura, 44, targeted a father and his adult daughter, sending the woman threatening messages and posting her picture and address online, authorities said. One posting said the homeowner wanted drugs and prostitutes at the house in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood in a Salt Lake City suburb.

Utah banning 'conversion therapy' with Mormon church backing

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Utah is on its way to becoming the 19th state to ban the discredited practice of conversion therapy in January after state officials formed a proposal that has the support of the influential Church of a Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Republican Gov. Gary Herbert announced Tuesday night that church leaders back a regulatory rule his office helped craft after legislative efforts for a ban on the therapy failed earlier this year.

The faith known widely as the Mormon church opposed a previous version of the rule because it wanted assurances that church leaders and members who are therapists would be allowed to provide spiritual counseling for parishioners or families — which were included in the latest conversion therapy ban plan.

Study: For babies born with HIV, start treatment right away

WASHINGTON (AP) — When babies are born with HIV, starting treatment within hours to days is better than waiting even the few weeks to months that's the norm in many countries, researchers reported Wednesday.

The findings, from a small but unique study in Botswana, could influence care in Africa and other regions hit hard by the virus. They also might offer a clue in scientists' quest for a cure.

The Harvard-led team found super early treatment limits how HIV takes root in a newborn's body, shrinking the "reservoir" of virus that hides out, ready to rebound if those youngsters ever stop their medications.

Trump visits troops in Afghanistan, reveals talks between US, Taliban

By JILL COLVIN
Associated Press

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan — President Donald Trump paid a surprise Thanksgiving visit to Afghanistan, where he announced the U.S. and Taliban have been engaged in ongoing peace talks and said he believes the Taliban want a cease-fire.

Trump arrived at Bagram Air Field shortly after 8:30 p.m. local time Thursday and spent 3½ hours on the ground during his first trip to the site of America's longest war. He served turkey and thanked the troops, delivered a speech and sat down with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani before leaving just after midnight.

As per tradition, reporters were under strict instructions to keep the trip a secret to ensure the president's safety in the country. About 12,000 U.S. forces remain in Afghanistan.

Traveling with Republican Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming and a small clutch of aides, including his acting chief of staff, press secretary and national security adviser, Trump appeared in good spirits as he was escorted around the base by heavily armed soldiers, as the smell of burning fuel and garbage wafted through the chilly air. Unlike last year's post-Christmas visit to Iraq — his first to an active combat zone — first lady Melania Trump did not make the trip.

Trump's first stop was a dining hall, where the crowd erupted into cheers when he arrived. There, he served turkey to soldiers dressed in fatigues and sat down for a meal. But he said he only tasted the mashed potatoes before he was pulled away for photos.

"I never got the turkey," he told the troops. "A gorgeous piece of turkey."

During his visit, Trump announced that the U.S. and Taliban have been engaged in peace talks and insisted the Taliban want to make a deal after heavy U.S. fire in recent months.

"We're meeting with them," he said. "And we're saying it has

to be a cease-fire. And they don't want to do a cease-fire, but now they do want to do a cease-fire, I believe ... and we'll see what happens."

The trip came after Trump abruptly broke off peace talks with the Taliban in September, canceling a secret meeting with Taliban and Afghan leaders at the Camp David presidential retreat after a particularly deadly spate of violence, capped by a bombing in Kabul that killed 12 people, including an American soldier.

That ended a nearly year-long effort by the U.S. to reach a political settlement with the Taliban, the group that protected al-Qaida extremists in Afghanistan, prompting U.S. military action after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. U.S. and international forces have been on the ground ever since.

IT WAS NOT IMMEDIATELY CLEAR how long or substantive the U.S. reengagement with the Taliban has been.

Trump ran his 2016 campaign promising to end the nation's "endless wars" and has been pushing to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and in the Middle East despite protests from top U.S. officials, Trump's Republican allies in Washington and many U.S. allies abroad. For months now, he has described American forces as "policemen" and argued that other countries' wars should be theirs to wage.

Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians and more than 2,400 American service members have been killed since the war began 18 years ago.

Just last week, Trump flew to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to oversee the transfer of the remains of two Army officers killed when their helicopter crashed as they provided security for troops on the ground in Logar province in eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban still controls or holds sway over about half of the country, staging near daily attacks targeting Afghan forces and government officials.

The U.S. and Taliban had been close to an agreement in September that might have enabled a U.S. troop withdrawal.

Nonetheless, Trump said Thursday that he was proceeding with a plan to reduce U.S. troop levels to about 8,600, telling reporters we're "bringing down the number of troops substantially."

Still, he said, the U.S. will stay in the country "until we have a deal or we have total victory."

Trump made the announcement as he met with Ghani, the Afghan president. Ghani thanked the Americans who have made the "ultimate sacrifice" in Afghanistan and assured the president that Afghan security forces are increasingly leading the fight.

"In the next three months, it's going to be all Afghanistan!" Ghani said.

Ghani also praised Trump for the October mission that killed Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Afghan leader also indicated, as Trump himself has, that the al-Baghdadi mission was even more significant than the 2011 mission targeting al-Qaida founder Osama bin Laden. The bin Laden mission was ordered by then-President Barack Obama.

"President Trump, people talked a lot about bin Laden, but what you did to eliminate al-Baghdadi, who was an organizer and not a talker, is a much greater accomplishment," said Ghani, in remarks to U.S. troops before Trump's departure.

The trip came a week after the Taliban freed an American and an Australian who had been held hostage since 2016 in exchange for three top Taliban figures — a move that has been widely seen as a possible entree to rekindling peace talks.

The White House took pains to keep the trip a secret after Trump's cover was blown last year when Air Force One was spotted en route to Iraq by an amateur British flight watcher.

Cellphones and other transmitting devices were confiscated for most of the trip from every-

one traveling aboard Air Force One. And Thanksgiving-themed tweets were teed up to publish ahead of time from Trump's account to prevent suspicions arising about the president's silence.

A small group of reporters was told to meet Wednesday night on the top floor of a parking garage in Maryland and was transported in black vans to Andrews Air Force Base. Nobody would confirm where he was going. The only guidance: Dress casually and warmly. Meanwhile, the president was secretly flying back from Florida, where reporters had been told he'd be spending Thanksgiving at his Mar-a-Lago club.

The plane he'd flown to Florida — the modified 747 painted in the iconic white and blue of Air Force One — remained parked on the tarmac at West Palm Beach Airport to avoid revealing the president's movement.

About 9:45 p.m. Wednesday, the president boarded a nearly identical plane concealed in a hangar at Andrews Air Force Base, taking off and landing under the cover of darkness, with cabin lights dimmed and window shutters drawn.

White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said plans for the visit had been in the works for weeks.

"It's a dangerous area and he wants to support the troops," Grisham told reporters before Trump landed. "He and Mrs. Trump recognize that there's a lot of people who are away from their families during the holidays, and we thought it'd be a nice surprise."

Shortly after midnight, Trump and his entourage departed from Afghanistan.

The president told the troops he was honored to spend part of his holiday with them.

"There is nowhere I'd rather celebrate this Thanksgiving than right here with the toughest, strongest, best and bravest warriors on the face of the earth," Trump said.

Report: US lacked technology to track separated families

PHOENIX (AP) — The U.S. government separated thousands of families despite knowing it lacked the technology to document and track their whereabouts, according to a report released Wednesday by an internal government watchdog.

The problem resulted in some parents languishing in custody for weeks without knowing the location of their children.

The report by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General found the agency lacked proper systems when Border Patrol agents took children from parents set to be criminally prosecuted for illegal entry.

Most of those separations took place in the spring of 2018, although the Border Patrol conducted a pilot program the previous summer.

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