

Nation BRIEFS

Robolympics



Associated Press

Thor, Virginia Tech College of Engineering, Robotics and Mechanisms Laboratory, tries to connect the hose to a firehose connection Friday during the hose task at the Homestead-Miami Speedway in Homestead, Fla. Seventeen teams from the United States, China, Japan and Korea are participating in the DARPA Robotics Challenge Trials. The event is a test of some of the most advanced robots in the world.

Gay couples wed in Utah after judge overturns ban

SALT LAKE CITY — A federal judge struck down Utah's same-sex marriage ban Friday in a decision that marks a drastic shift toward gay marriage in a conservative state where the Mormon church has long been against it.

The decision set off an immediate frenzy as the clerk in the state's most populous county began issuing marriage licenses to gay couples while state officials took steps to appeal the ruling and halt the process.

Cheers erupted as the mayor of Salt Lake City led the state's first gay wedding ceremony in an office building about three miles from the headquarters of the Mormon church. Dozens of other couples were lined up to get marriage licenses.

State Sen. Jim Dabakis, chairman of the Utah Democratic Party, was the first to get married in Salt Lake City with his longtime partner, Stephen Justesen.

Newlyweds ordered to trial in slaying

SUNBURY, Pa. — Newlyweds who police said wanted to kill someone together were ordered Friday to stand trial on charges they lured a stranger with a Craigslist ad, stabbed him to death after he got into their car and dumped his body in an alley.

Miranda Barbour, 18, and 22-year-old Elytte Barbour of Selinsgrove pleaded not guilty at separate hearings Friday in the central Pennsylvania city of Sunbury.

They are being held without bail in the Nov. 11 death of Troy LaFerrara, 42, of Port Trevorton.

The couple, who were married in North Carolina and moved to Pennsylvania about three weeks before the crime, told police Miranda Barbour stabbed LaFerrara in the front seat of her car while her husband held a cord around his neck.

Police allege in court papers that Elytte Barbour told investigators they committed the crime because they wanted to kill someone together.

But defense attorney James Best said he didn't know his client's alleged motive. Authorities said Miranda Barbour, a petite woman with long brown hair, told investigators she met the 6-foot-2, 278-pound victim after he responded to her Craigslist ad offering companionship for money, and that they traveled in her car from Selinsgrove to Sunbury, a small city about 100 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

The couple allegedly dumped the body in an alley, where it was discovered the following morning.

—From wire reports

Defense spending bill comes with warning

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama on Friday gave the military a one-year deadline to better prevent and respond to a wave of sexual assault in the ranks and warned that if progress isn't made, he will consider tougher reforms than those approved by Congress.

The ultimatum from their commander in chief and pressure from lawmakers puts the onus on the Pentagon to live up to its vows of zero tolerance for sexual assault, or face the potential of losing authority to prosecute offenders in its own courts.

"So long as our women and men in uniform face the insider threat of sexual assault, we have an urgent obligation to do more to support victims and hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes, as appropriate under the military justice system," Obama said in a statement issued hours after the Senate sent a bill for his signature that would crack down on the crime.

The president said he wants Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to report back to him by Dec. 1, 2014, on improvements they've

made preventing and responding to sexual assault.

The Pentagon estimates that 26,000 military members were victims last year.

The sexual assault measures were part of a sweeping, \$632.8 billion bill the Senate passed on an 84-15 vote late Thursday that also covers combat pay and other benefits, new ships and aircraft and military bases. The legislation also:

- Provides \$552.1 billion for the regular military budget and \$80.7 billion for the war in Afghanistan and other overseas operations, a reflection of deficit-driven efforts to trim spending and the draw-

down in a conflict lasting more than a decade.

- Gives the administration additional flexibility to move detainees out of the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to foreign countries. It stops well short of the president's goal of closing the detention facility and bans detainee transfers to the United States.

- Authorizes funds for the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria

- Provides money to study the feasibility of establishing a missile defense site on the East Coast.

The legislation would strip military commanders of their ability to overturn

jury convictions, require a civilian review if a commander declines to prosecute a case and require that any individual convicted of sexual assault face a dishonorable discharge or dismissal. The bill also would provide victims with legal counsel, eliminate the statute of limitations for courts-martial in rape and sexual assault cases, and criminalize retaliation against victims who report a sexual assault. The legislation also would change the military's Article 32 proceedings to limit intrusive questioning of victims, making it more similar to a grand jury.



Associated Press

President Barack Obama speaks Friday during an end-of-the year news conference in the Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House in Washington, D.C. At the end of his fifth year in office, Obama's job approval and personal favorability ratings have fallen to around the lowest point of his presidency. Obama will depart later for his home state of Hawaii for his annual Christmas vacation trip. It's the first time in his presidency that his departure plans have not been delayed by legislative action in Washington.

Rosy spin on a rough presidential year

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Putting a rosy spin on a difficult year, President Barack Obama acknowledged frustrating "ups and downs" on Friday but exulted that the improving economy is creating new jobs and claimed crucial progress for his troubled health care overhaul. He predicted 2014 would be "a breakthrough year for America."

In his annual year-end news conference, Obama refused to dwell on his tumbling approval ratings, the disastrous rollout of his signature health care law or the pile of unfinished domestic priorities he leaves behind as he heads for a Christmas holiday in Hawaii. Asked whether this had been the worst year of his presidency so far, he laughed and said, "That's not how I think about it."

Yet not all was sunny. He did suggest that, given widespread criticism, he may alter the power

of the National Security Agency to collect information on Americans.

And when it came to the start of his health care law, Obama conceded that "we screwed it up," and said, "I'm going to be making appropriate adjustments once we get through this year." It was unclear if he meant to signal high-level personnel changes.

Obama does have some reason to be optimistic. He spoke hours after the government announced the economy grew at a solid 4.1 percent annual rate from July through September, the fastest pace since late 2011 and significantly higher than previously believed. And he heralded a modest bipartisan budget deal that cleared Congress this week, saying that while it's too soon to declare a new era of bipartisanship, Washington is "not condemned to endless gridlock."

The president opened his hour-long news conference with upbeat news on his health care

law, announcing that 1 million people have enrolled in federal and state insurance exchanges since Oct. 1.

Obama also renewed his longstanding statement that he will not negotiate concessions with Republicans in exchange for legislation that will be needed in late winter or early spring to raise the nation's debt limit. "It is not something that is a negotiating tool. It's not leverage. It's a responsibility of Congress," he said.

On a key foreign policy concern, Obama said it would be wrong to impose new sanctions on Iran at a time when the United States and other nations are testing an interim accord designed to curtail Tehran's nuclear program.

Obama did leave behind a New Year's resolution before boarding Air Force One.

"My New Year's resolution is to be nicer to the White House press corps," he said.

Rebels said to control S. Sudanese oil fields

Associated Press

JUBA, South Sudan — Armed rebels were said to be in control of some of South Sudan's oil fields Friday, raising questions of how long the country's oil will flow and whether Sudan could enter the conflict, which showed no signs of ending.

President Salva Kiir implored his country to turn away from ethnic violence and met Friday with foreign ministers from neighboring states, including Kenya and Ethiopia, who flew into Juba, the capital, to help calm tensions after a week of ethnic strife that is estimated to have killed hundreds.



Associated Press

Civilians fleeing violence seek refuge Wednesday at the UNMISS compound in Bor, capital of Jonglei state, in South Sudan.

The U.N. Security Council urged the president and ousted vice president Riek Machar "to demon-

strate leadership in bringing a swift and peaceful resolution to this crisis."

France's U.N. Ambassa-

dor, Gerard Araud, the current council president, told reporters that Kiir and the widow of South Sudan's rebel hero John Garang, who led the country's fight for independence, have agreed to enter an unconditional dialogue.

There was no word yet from Machar, who is believed to be in hiding.

Kiir, an ethnic Dinka, earlier this week said an attempted coup had triggered the violence, and the blame was placed on Machar, an ethnic Nuer. But officials have since said a fight between Dinka and Nuer members of the presidential guard triggered the fighting Sunday night that has since spread across the country.

World BRIEFS

27.4 percent



Associated Press

An elderly woman lies on the ground begging for alms Friday in a main street on the northern Greek port city of Thessaloniki. Homelessness has increased dramatically during a savage six-year recession of the financial crisis in Greece where the unemployment rate reached 27.4 percent in September.

Anti-prostitution laws stricken by Canadian court

TORONTO — Canada's highest court struck down the country's anti-prostitution laws Friday, a victory for sex workers who argued that a ban on brothels and other measures made their profession more dangerous. The ruling drew criticism from the conservative government and religious leaders.

The court, ruling in a case brought by three women in the sex trade, struck down all three of Canada's prostitution-related laws: bans on keeping a brothel, making a living from prostitution, and street soliciting. The ruling won't take effect immediately, however, because the court gave Parliament a year to respond with new legislation, and said the existing laws would remain in place until then.

Ugandan bill: Life in prison for gay sex

KAMPALA, Uganda — Ugandan lawmakers on Friday passed an anti-gay bill that calls for life imprisonment for certain homosexual acts, drawing criticism from rights campaigners who called it "the worst in the world."

The legislation sets life imprisonment as the penalty for gay sex involving an HIV-infected person, acts with minors and the disabled, as well as repeated sex offenses among consenting adults, according to the office of a spokeswoman for Uganda's parliament.

The bill also prescribes a seven-year jail term for a person who "conducts a marriage ceremony" for same-sex couples.

When the bill was first introduced in 2009, it was widely condemned for including the death penalty, but that was removed from the revised version passed by parliament.

President Yoweri Museveni must sign the bill within 30 days for it to become law.

—From wire reports