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2026 FIFA WORLD CUP QUALIFIER

Confident Qatar eye Iran scalp in blockbuster clash

'WE KNOW THE STRENGTH OF THE IRANIAN TEAM VERY WELL BUT WE HAVE PREPARED WELL'

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Asian champions Qatar will be looking for their second successive win in their qualifying journey for the 2026 FIFA World Cup when they face continental giants Iran in Dubai today.

Last week, coach Marquez Lopez's side comfortably beat Kyrgyzstan 3-1 in what was the first win for two-time Asian champions after a loss against the UAE, which followed a draw with North Korea last month.

Lopez yesterday said in Dubai that his squad remained upbeat ahead of their game against Iran, coached by Amir Ghalenoei.

"Our victory over Kyrgyzstan (last Thursday) was a great moral boost for the entire squad. We are confident that we can build on it and continue in the same aggressive manner to gain more points," Lopez said yesterday during a pre-match news conference.

"We know the strength of the Iranian team very well. And yes, we have a difficult match ahead of us. But we have prepared well. We can contain the threat their players present. Let me tell you we have developed a strategy that will boost our game," the Spaniard added.

Qatar defender Tariq Salman said yesterday: "We are excited about the match against the Iranian team. This match undoubtedly seems very difficult, but everyone on our side is ready to go after a winning result. Our victory in the last game gave us great confidence and now we have the ability to get another win."

Lopez will be hoping to see another powerful performance from key defender Abdelkarim Hassan who was recalled to the national set-up after almost two years in the wilderness. Against Kyrgyzstan, Hassan was the platform that allowed Qatar to have experience at the back and threatening runs from the flanks.

Almoez Ali, Qatar's chief striker, opened the scoring in the 3-1 win against Kyrgyzstan with a slick



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez addresses the media during a news conference in Dubai yesterday. Qatar face Iran in a 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match today. **RIGHT:** Qatar players train at Rashid Stadium in Dubai yesterday.



Qatar defender Tariq Salman takes questions during a news conference in Dubai yesterday.



Qatar players during a team training session yesterday.

finish in the 39th minute. With the ever reliable Akram Afif set to start the game today and new legs in Edmilson Jr also available, Almoez can add much needed teeth in the front of the Iranian goalmouth.

Iran coach Ghalenoei admitted Qatar could present a danger to his side today. "Qatar play football

with a plan and they are dangerous. A few months ago, we played in the Asian Cup (semi-finals) which we lost. But this game has its own conditions and it is very different from that match," Ghalenoei said yesterday.

"Football is for enjoyment and we must try to win a good game

to make our fans happy. We are not looking for revenge, because football is not a place to take revenge, but we want to win to make our fans happy. We respect the good team of Qatar. They have shown that football is progressing in Asia," he added. "If we win this important game, we will have fin-

QATAR VS IRAN - KEY POINTS

- ** Qatar** and Iran are set for a blockbuster clash when they meet in Group A of the AFC Asian Qualifiers - Road to 26 today.
- ** Iran** lead the standings together with Uzbekistan while a win for Qatar will see the two-time AFC Asian Cup champions drawing level with today's opponents.
- ** Iran** had to be satisfied with a draw against Uzbekistan on Thursday and will know that they can't afford to drop points against Qatar.
- ** Particularly** concerning for head coach Amir Ghalenoei will be the fact that goals have been

hard to come by, with Iran only having found the back of the net twice in three matches.

- ** Thursday's** 3-1 win against Kyrgyzstan was Qatar's first triumph of their campaign and head coach Marquez Lopez will be hoping the victory was the booster his side needed in their bid to qualify for the FIFA World Cup on merit for the first time.
- ** The** West Asian side will go into the tie with the psychological advantage of having defeated Iran 3-2 in thrilling AFC Asian Cup semi-final in February.

ished more than 50% of our qualifying journey and this is what we are looking for," the coach said.

Iran goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand said yesterday: "We knew we could have advanced comfortably by winning against two toughest teams in the group - Uzbekistan and Qatar. Unfortunately, in the

first game against Uzbekistan, despite the fact that we played well, the game ended with a goalless draw. Now we are ready to compete with Qatar and I hope we can get a good result."

The match kicks off at Rashid Stadium in Dubai at 7pm Qatar standard time.

FOCUS

Football fans set to cheer on Qatar against Iran

The Al Annabi Stand initiative has declared its unwavering support for the Qatari national team for their 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match against Iran in Dubai today. The match will be played at Rashid Stadium. The initiative aims to motivate the players and bolster their chances of qualifying for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Mubarak al-Mansouri, the media official of Al Annabi Stand, confirmed in a statement to Qatar News Agency (QNA) that the initiative will be present in force at Rashid Stadium to cheer on the Qatari football team.

The initiative plans to bring together approximately 400 fans to support the team and boost their morale.

Al-Mansouri expressed optimism about the Qatari team's ability to secure a positive result against Iran. He highlighted the team's recent success in winning the 2023 Asian Cup and emphasised the importance of their performance in the upcoming matches.

The Al Annabi Stand initiative has made preparations to create a vibrant atmosphere for the match. They plan to distribute maroon scarves and flags to the fans and encourage them to support the team both inside and outside the stadium. The initiative believes that the fans' support is crucial in motivating the players and creating a positive atmosphere. Al-Mansouri stressed the importance of moral



support for the Qatari team and emphasized the need for fans to instil enthusiasm in the players. He acknowledged the challenges of the match against Iran but expressed confidence in the team's ability to secure a victory and improve their chances of qualifying for the World Cup.

Meanwhile, retired midfielder Adel Khamis yesterday said Qatar can rise to the occasion against Iran in the UAE today.

The 1992 Gulf Cup winner told QNA that

Marquez Lopez's players need to strengthen their defence to snatch win in the blockbuster clash in Group A of the third round of the qualifiers.

"Akram Afif's teammates must avoid making mistakes against Iran who have great potential as individuals as most of their players are seen in action in European leagues," the former Qatar international, who represented the national side from 1984-2000, added.



Iran players during a team training session at the Rashid Stadium in Dubai on the eve of their match against Qatar today.



Iran coach Amir Ghalenoei addresses a news conference in Dubai yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

Young Ravindra excited for India series

AFP
Bengaluru, India

New Zealand batter Rachin Ravindra said yesterday facing India in Bengaluru in the birth city of his father will be "special" moment with his family cheering in the stands. The Black Caps begin the three Test match series tomorrow, but the Wellington-born Ravindra – who called himself "a Kiwi all the way through" – said facing India will be an emotional moment.

"I am very proud of my Indian origin," the 24-year-old told reporters.

"To be able to play where a lot of my family is based is something special."

Ravindra has played nine Tests since his debut in Kanpur in 2021 and has become a regular in the national team with his swashbuckling batting.

The left-hander enjoyed a prolific ODI World Cup in India last year, and then made an impression in his debut Indian Premier League T20 tournament for Chennai Super Kings.

He called them both "two pretty cool experiences to have", but said playing a Test was "something different".

"Test cricket is the pinnacle," he said, and so it "makes it extra significant because of the family connection" to play in Bengaluru.

"Dad will be here watching," he said.

"Those moments, you pinch yourself on the journey".

Ravindra, who plays spin well on turning sub-continent pitches, amassed 578 runs including three centuries 10 World Cup matches in 2023.

In the IPL, he scored 222 runs for five-time winners Chennai, at a strike-rate of over 160. Having experienced cricket in India,



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra attends a practice session ahead of their first Test against India at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru yesterday. The first Test starts tomorrow. (AFP)

he said he was eager for the challenge ahead. "We know how passionate the Indian people are about cricket", he said, praising the "hype

and the buzz" around the game – and that he was "excited to have a fully fledged three-match series" to play.

'Players who can hurt us'
But New Zealand face a stiff challenge.

India, led by Rohit Sharma, remain firm favourites after their recent 2-0 sweep of Bangladesh and will look to consolidate their position at the top of the World Test Championship table.

The hosts handed a bruising defeat to Bangladesh in the final Test, where more than two days were lost due to rain.

"We want to be a team that can make 400 runs in a day, and bat for two days to draw," India's head coach Gautam Gambhir said.

"That's called growth, that's called adaptability – and that's called Test cricket.

"I can't talk about world cricket. Every team has their ideologies, their methods to play Test cricket. I can only talk about my team.

"If we are ever in such a situation where we have to bat for two days to draw a Test, we have play-

ers in the dressing room who can bat for two days.

"Ultimately, our first motive is to win a match and then if there is a situation where the team has to play for a draw, we have to keep those options open as well. That is the kind of Test cricket that we want to play."

New Zealand are on the last leg of their sub-continent tour, which started with a washout against Afghanistan near New Delhi.

The Kiwis then lost 2-0 in Sri Lanka after going down in a hard-fought opener.

But Gambhir urged caution from India, saying New Zealand should not be underestimated.

"New Zealand is a completely different challenge. We know that they're a very, very good team," he said.

"We know they've got some really high-quality players.

"They've got players who can hurt us."

PREVIEW

Stokes returns as England get ready for 'spin assault'

Pakistan have now gone winless in 11 home Tests since Feb 2021

AFP
Multan, Pakistan

Returning England captain Ben Stokes said yesterday he hopes a reused pitch for the second Test against Pakistan in Multan will play into the tourists' hands rather than the spin-heavy hosts.

Desperate to level the three-match series after an innings and 47-run defeat on Friday, Pakistan named three spinners in four changes from the first Test.

In a rare move, Pakistan – who have now gone winless in 11 home Tests since February 2021 – decided to use the same flat surface on which England piled up 823-7 declared in reply to their 556 all out.

"If you look at the way that the first Test played out, if another wicket like that was produced, maybe that gives us more of an advantage," said Stokes, back in the side after missing the first Test with a hamstring injury.

Despite the first-innings runoff – with Harry Brook smashing 317 and Joe Root making 262 – England bowled out Pakistan for 220 in their second innings to secure a remarkable victory.

England left out seamers Gus Atkinson and Chris Woakes to bring in Matthew Potts and Stokes, but kept the same spinners in Jack Leach and Shoaib Bashir.

"You'd like to think it might be a bit more in favour of the spin, so if it does spin more, or if it does reverse more, there's more options there for both teams," added Stokes. The all-rounder, who may



England's captain Ben Stokes (right) and Zak Crawley bat in the nets during a practice session on the eve of their second Test against Pakistan at the Multan Cricket Stadium. (AFP)

not yet be fit to bowl, said he has never seen such a strategy before.

"It could be a tactic but I've never seen a pitch before used in back-to-back games. And I've never seen fans that big standing as umpires," he said, referring to two big industrial fans at both ends being used to dry the pitch.

Since Stokes and head coach Brendon McCullum took over in May 2022, England have played aggressive cricket, with only one draw.

"I think if we went 1-0 down at home, we would probably be going to our groundsman at the

second Test saying 'can we have a bit more of this, bit more of that' to use our home advantage in our favour.

"With me being captain and Baz being coach, that's how we both view cricket, that there should be a winner."

Pakistan's assistant coach Azhar Mahmood believes the pitch will help his team.

"The strategy behind the used pitch is to take 20 wickets," said Mahmood.

"We want to get 20 England wickets and going with spinners will help us dominate."

Zahid Mahmood, Sajid Khan and Noman Ali make up Pakistan's spin trio, with Aamer Jamal the only frontline pace bowler.

Mahmood defended the decision to leave out struggling star batter Babar Azam.

"There is no question that Babar Azam is our best batter," said Mahmood of Azam, who is without a half-century in 18 innings.

"He is not dropped, we have given him rest considering the coming hectic cricket schedule and we thought it would be best for him to come refreshed for the three away tours coming."

NZ thrash Pakistan to reach Women's T20 World Cup semis



New Zealand team celebrate beating Pakistan in their ICC T20 Women's World Cup match in Dubai yesterday. (@WHITE_FERNS)

Dubai: Some fine bowling from Amelia Kerr and Eden Carson propelled New Zealand into the semi-finals of the Women's T20 World Cup with a 54-run thrashing of Pakistan in their last group match yesterday.

Off-spinner Carson, who was named player of the match, took 2-7 from her three overs while Kerr ended with 3-14 as New Zealand bowled out Pakistan for just 56 in 11.4 overs.

New Zealand, who posted 110-6 off their 20 overs, became the second team from Group A to make it to the last-four after holders Australia who finish on top. Defeat marked the end of Pakistan's hopes of qualifying and meant that India were also eliminated, paying the price for their opening 58-run defeat by New Zealand.

"It hasn't sunk in yet," said New Zealand captain Sophie Devine.

"We will certainly celebrate tonight but this is just the next stage of a tournament we are looking forward to."

Pakistan needed to reach the target in just 10.4 overs if they were to improve their net run rate enough to overhaul the White Ferns in the table.

Reduced to 28-5 at the end of powerplay, Pakistan never recovered.

BRIEF SCORES
New Zealand 110-6 in 20 overs (Suzie Bates 28, Brooke Halliday 22; Nashra Sandhu 3-18) v **Pakistan 56 all out in 11.4 overs** (Fatima Sana 21, Muneeba Ali 15; Amelia Kerr 3-14, Eden Carson 2-7)

Result: New Zealand win by 54 runs
Player of the Match: Eden Carson (NZL)
Toss: New Zealand

FOCUS

Smith experiment as Test opener over, Green out of India series

AFP
Sydney

Steve Smith's short-lived stint as a Test opener came to an end yesterday with confirmation he will drop down the Australian batting order against India next month, while all-rounder Cameron Green was ruled out of the series.

The 35-year-old veteran Smith moved up to open alongside Usman Khawaja after David Warner's retirement in January.

But after an encouraging start he struggled and will revert to the middle order, likely his preferred number four slot, in the five Tests against India starting in Perth on November 22.

"Pat (Cummins), Andrew (McDonald) and Steve Smith had been having ongoing conversations, separate to the untimely injury to Cameron," chief selector George Bailey said.

"Steve had expressed a desire to move back down from that opening position, and Pat and Andrew have confirmed that he will be dropping back down the order for the summer."

Green had successfully shifted up to number four when Smith opened, but he will play no part in the series after opting to undergo surgery on his spine this week.

The 25-year-old, who has a history of stress fractures, complained of back pain during Australia's one-day tour of England in September and was immediately

sent home. "Whilst spine stress fractures are not unusual in pace bowlers, Cam has a unique defect in an adjacent area to the fracture that is believed to be contributing to the injury," Cricket Australia said.

"After thorough consultation it was determined Cameron would benefit from the surgery to stabilise the defect and reduce the risk of future recurrence."

The governing body said his recovery time was anticipated to be around six months.

"The decision to proceed to surgery is with Cameron's long-term future as an all-rounder in mind," it added.

The surgery will also rule him out of February's Test tour of Sri Lanka and the ICC Champions Trophy tournament.

With Smith set to move back to number four, Australia need to decide who will open with Khawaja.

Once again, Marcus Harris, Cameron Bancroft and Matt Renshaw are seen as in contention, as is teenage sensation Sam Konstas.

The 19-year-old surged into the picture after twin centuries in the Sheffield Shield this month.

Harris, Bancroft and Konstas were all included in an Australia A squad yesterday for two red-ball games against India A next month.

"We have another three-and-half or four weeks until that Test squad is announced and who is in it and in what order," said Bailey yesterday.

"How they line up will be determined."

The rise and fall of Pakistan batting maestro Babar Azam

Multan: Babar Azam was on top of the world two years ago – Pakistan captain and top-rated batsman in all three formats – but he will celebrate his 30th birthday at home today when the second Test against England begins in Multan.

Pakistan on Sunday left out Azam from the second Test squad after a poor run of form where he has failed to pass fifty in his last 18 Test innings. It is the first time Azam has been dropped from the Pakistan team since his white-ball debut against Zimbabwe in Lahore in 2015 and Test baptism against the West Indies a year later.

Azam shot to prominence with three successive hundreds in an ODI series against the West Indies in 2016. He replaced India great Virat Kohli as world number one ODI batsman five years later, a place he still occupies having been briefly deposed in between. He is still ranked fourth among Twenty20 batsmen but it is the



long format where his form has suffered the most and his slump has seen him fall outside the world's top 10.

A 13-year-old Azam was a ball boy in Pakistan's Test against South Africa in Lahore in 2007, where he could watch his childhood idol AB de Villiers. From the streets of Lahore he rose to play in the 2010 Under-19 World Cup in New Zealand, topping the batting charts for Pakistan with 298 runs in six games. Two years in at the U-19 World Cup in Australia he was captain and again leading

run-scorer, with 287.

In 2015 he was picked for the senior side and after thrilling in the white-ball game developed into a modern-day great in all three formats, often drawing comparison with Kohli.

His opening partnership with Mohammad Rizwan in Twenty20s has realised 3,268 runs in 70 innings – the most by a pair in the format.

He anchored Pakistan's only T20 World Cup win over arch-rivals India in 2021 in Dubai. He hit an epic 196 against the famed Australian pace attack of Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon to draw a Test in Karachi in 2022 – hailed as one of the greatest innings in Pakistan.

But the pressure of captaining a struggling Pakistan took its toll and began to affect Azam's form with the bat.

Following Pakistan's first round exit from the 50-over World Cup in India last November, where his side lost to Afghanistan for

the first time, Azam stepped down from the captaincy in all three formats. When the Pakistan Cricket Board hierarchy changed in April this year he was reinstated as white-ball skipper.

But it proved to be a short-lived tenure as Pakistan lost a T20 to Ireland before crashing out of the T20 World Cup in June after being stunned by the USA and losing to India.

He resigned as white ball captain for a second time earlier this month. But it was in Tests where his form deserted him the most and a poor run in the series defeat against Bangladesh last month saw him score just 64 in four innings.

His 30 and five on a faultless Multan batting wicket in the first Test defeat against England, coupled with the formation of a new selection panel straight after, saw him left out for the second Test despite a vote of confidence from captain Shan Masood and his coach Jason Gillespie.

FOOTBALL

Rice praises England interim boss Carsley despite uncertainty

AFP
London

Decan Rice says England's players love playing under caretaker boss Lee Carsley and do not need clarity on his future despite uncertainty over the managerial position.

Carsley was appointed as Gareth Southgate's successor on a temporary basis in August, initially for the Nations League campaign over three international windows.

However, the 50-year-old, who stepped up from his role as under-21s manager, has since given mixed messages about whether he wants the job on a permanent basis.

After Thursday's shock 2-1 defeat to Greece at Wembley he said he would "hopefully" be going back to his role with the under-21s before saying the job should be given to a "world-class manager" in a TV interview following Sunday's 3-1 win in Finland.

Carsley had been heavily criticised for

playing five attacking midfielders and no recognised striker against Greece and he selected a more conventional line-up this time.

England were still far from impressive for long periods, but they mustered enough quality to grind out a third win in four games since Carsley replaced Gareth Southgate.

Jack Grealish opened the scoring in the first half and Trent Alexander-Arnold's superb free-kick doubled the lead after the interval before Declan Rice's tap-in wrapped up the points.

But just minutes after that, in his post-match press conference in Helsinki, he said he was "definitely" not ruling himself out of the running for the permanent position. Arsenal midfielder Rice brushed aside suggestions that the uncertainty was unsettling for the players.

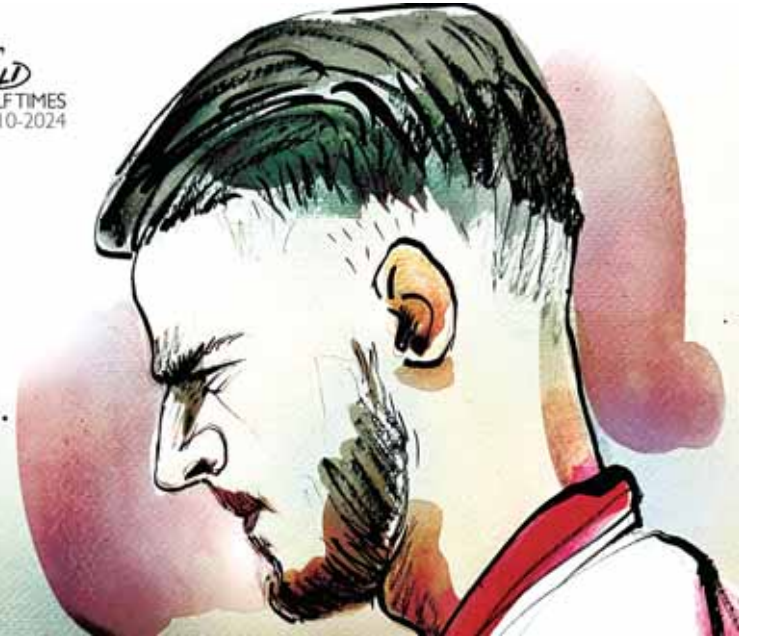
Asked whether the squad needed clarity, Rice, who scored the final goal in England's win in Helsinki, told said: "No, not at all. He has been clear with us when he came in...that he was looking after us for three

camp. With the way he has been and the way we have played, I think he has been unbelievable. It's my first time working with him because I haven't worked with the under-21s, but the 21s boys that have come in couldn't speak highly enough of him. We as senior players are not surprised but we have said how good he was in meetings and games and how he takes training."

Thursday's defeat to Greece at Wembley, where Carsley played an experimental team packed with attacking players, appeared to be a major blow to his hopes of landing the England job permanently. But Rice said the players should take responsibility for that defeat. "We were the problem on Thursday night," he said. "There were too many sub-par performances. It was a different game if we score goals. That is down to us not Lee."

England head to Athens next month trailing the hosts by three points and knowing defeat would end their chances of promotion back to League A as Group B2 winners, though they could still achieve promotion via a play-off.

R. W. ROWLES
GULFTIMES
15-10-2024



SPOTLIGHT

Australia look to ruin Japan's World Cup party

Aussies have just a single win, a draw and lost to Bahrain

Reuters
Saitama, Japan

Defender Kye Rowles believes Australia will be energised by the hostile environment in Saitama as they look to halt Japan's juggernaut charge towards the 2026 World Cup in an Asian qualifier today.

The Socceroos have built up a fierce rivalry with the Samurai Blue since switching to the Asian confederation in 2006, even if it has been somewhat one-sided in favour of the Japanese in recent years. Today, Rowles and his teammates will face a partisan crowd of around 60,000 at Saitama Stadium willing Japan on to a fourth straight win in Group C of the third round of Asian qualifying.

"We've played in some pretty hostile crowds together as a group," the centre-half said. "I think hostile crowds really get you going in a different way than home crowds. Home crowds makes it all nice and pretty and you've got the support and it gives you that confidence. The hostile crowds really get your back up and you go, 'well now I'm not letting you have a party. I'm going to try and ruin it! So look, our mentality is to go out there and try and ruin their party!'"

Japan have been in irrepressible form in the third round of qualifying as they target an eighth straight visit to the World Cup finals, thrashing China 7-0 and Bahrain 5-0 before beating Saudi Arabia 2-0 in Jeddah last Thursday. Australia, looking to lock up a berth at a sixth successive finals by finishing in the top two in Group C, have just a single win and a draw after being upset by Bahrain at home in their opener and held 0-0 by Indonesia in Jakarta.

Rowles, though, thinks they showed enough in the 3-1 win over China in new coach Tony Popovic's first match in charge last week to suggest a first win over Japan in their last 10 meetings might be on the cards. "Obviously, the last few years they've had our number," he added. "There was plenty of positives Thursday (so) hopefully we can flip the script a little



Australian players train in Saitama, Japan, yesterday, ahead of their World Cup qualifiers.

bit and put in a good performance and get one back on them. We just want to go out there and know that if we put in the best performance we can, it gives us a good shot of giving them a red hot crack."

Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu moved to quash any sense of complacency against Australia. "Data doesn't make us win tomorrow's match," Moriyasu said through an interpreter. "Whatever the data shows, we have prepared best for tomorrow's match at home. We want to make sure that we have the best performance tomorrow. Data tells us that we prob-

ably have an advantage, however, when I think about the situation of the Socceroos, even if the data says that they haven't been doing too well until now, the head coach has changed and they will do their best; they will challenge themselves and they will probably throw themselves at us.

He added: "We have to prepare for that. And for the players, of course, it is important for players to be cautious but I also tell them to be confident. I tell them to try even more than they have been trying, and that is our challenge."

FOCUS

Football leagues, unions file EU complaint against FIFA in calendar dispute

AFP
Brussels, Belgium

Major bodies representing footballers and clubs in Europe yesterday filed a complaint to the European Commission accusing FIFA of abusing its position over changes to the international match calendar and tournament expansions.

Football's world governing body "holds conflicting roles as governing body and competition organiser, which give rise to a conflict of interest", FIFPro Europe, the European Leagues body and Spain's La Liga said in a statement. The bodies presented their complaint at a press conference in Brussels, saying that FIFA's "imposition of decisions on the international calendar is an abuse of dominance and violates EU law".

FIFPro is the global players' union while European Leagues brings together more than one thousand clubs from 33 countries around Europe. Its member leagues include the English Premier League, as well as the leagues in Italy, Germany and France, but not La Liga, which joined the complaint separately.

Citing recent European court rulings related to the breakaway Super League and the Lassana Diarra case, the bodies said FIFA's rules and conduct "harm the economic interests of national leagues, and the health and safety of players in European football".

"A legal challenge before

the European Commission has become a necessary course of action to safeguard the European football sector," they added. FIFA has been accused of a failure to consult over recent changes to the calendar, such as the introduction of a 32-team Club World Cup.

The first edition of the expanded Club World Cup will take place in the United States in June and July next year and 12 European clubs are due to feature. Many of the continent's leading players will therefore be obliged to participate at a time when they would otherwise have been afforded a long close-season break, a year ahead of the expanded 48-team World Cup in North America.

A recent FIFPro report accused football's governing bodies of putting players' health at risk amid a constantly growing calendar, while some leading players have evoked the possibility of going on strike to protest against the increasing demands being made of them. Representatives of domestic leagues, meanwhile, have voiced concerns that their competitions will suffer the most as top players will inevitably miss more domestic matches in order to rest, damaging their brands.

FIFA has previously hit back at criticism and accused leagues of acting with "commercial self-interest (and) hypocrisy". "Those leagues apparently prefer a calendar filled with friendlies and summer tours, often involving extensive global travel," the body said in July after it first emerged that legal action was planned.



FIFPro Europe president David Terrier (centre) with La Liga chief Javier Tebas and EPL director of international football relations and EU affairs Mathieu Moreuil during the press conference in Brussels. (Reuters)

CAMEROON AND ALGERIA SEAL CUP OF NATIONS FINALS PLACES

Cape Town: Five-time winners Cameroon and 2019 champions Algeria both booked their places at next year's Africa Cup of Nations finals in Morocco after victories in qualifying yesterday, bringing the number of qualified teams to four.

Cameroon defeated Kenya 1-0 when Boris Enow scored the only goal of the game in neutral Kampala, while Ramy Bensebaini netted a first half spot-kick winner for Algeria against Togo in Lome. Enow drilled a low free kick into the goal from just outside the box as Cameroon dominated the contest and did enough to win in the absence of their federation president Samuel Eto'o, who is serving a six-month stadium ban by world governing body FIFA.

The victory takes Cameroon to 10 points from four games in the pool and ensured they cannot finish outside of the top two, which is enough to secure a place at the 24-team finals. Algeria have a full haul of 12 points from four games after Bensebaini converted a penalty on 18 minutes to give them lead, but they had to weather heavy pressure from their hosts, who created enough chances to get something from the game.

Cameroon and Algeria join the hosts and Burkina Faso as the four teams so far confirmed for the finals. Zimbabwe moved into a strong position in their pool with a 3-1 win over Namibia in neutral Johannesburg that leaves them on eight points, four ahead of third-placed Kenya with two rounds to play. One of those fixtures is at home to Kenya next month.

Walter Musona scored a brace, one a penalty, to go with a strike from Prince Dube. Equatorial Guinea are five points clear in second place in their pool after a 2-1 win over Liberia in Monrovia. Gambia move into second place in their pool, ahead of Comoros on head-to-head record, but having played a game more.

POGBA HUNGRY TO RETURN AFTER DOPING BAN

French international Paul Pogba said yesterday he was hungry to return to football after his doping ban was last week reduced from four years to 18 months. "Football is the strawberry cake that was taken out of my mouth," Pogba said in an interview from the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris.

Pogba, who is under contract with Italian giants Juventus until 2026, will be

able to return to competitive football from March 11 next year, four days before his 32nd birthday. Capped 91 times for France, Pogba tested positive for testosterone in August 2023 after a match between Juventus and Udinese in Italy.

He was provisionally suspended in September of the same year, and then banned for four years by the Italian National Anti-Doping Tribunal the following February. Pogba's representatives said the testosterone came from a food supplement prescribed by a doctor he consulted in the United States.

At the beginning of October, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) reduced this sanction to 18 months. "The nightmare is over," said Pogba, adding he was "really looking forward to coming back".

Asked about a possible arrival in Ligue 1, Pogba, who has never played in the French league during his senior career, responded: "why not?"

A key figure when France won the 2018 World Cup in Russia, Pogba collected four Serie A titles in his first stint at Juventus but had a string of problems, on and off the pitch, after his 2022 return from Manchester United. He was also the victim of an

alleged organised extortion, for which six men, including his brother Mathias, were last month ordered to stand trial.

MENDY BORROWED MONEY FROM CITY TEAMMATES FOR LEGAL FEES

Former Manchester City footballer Benjamin Mendy borrowed money from teammates for legal fees and child support after he was charged with sexual offences, an employment tribunal heard. Mendy is claiming £11.5mn (\$15mn) in unpaid wages by the Premier League champions, who stopped paying him after he was charged with rape and sexual assault in 2021.

The ex-France international was found not guilty of six counts of rape and one count of sexual assault in January 2023, but the same jury could not reach a verdict on another count of rape and one count of attempted rape. After a retrial, Mendy was found not guilty of both charges.

Mendy, who joined City from Monaco for a reported £52mn in 2017, was released by the club in June 2023 following the expiry of his contract. Court documents shared with the Manchester employment tribunal said Mendy "very quickly ran out of money" and had to sell his Cheshire

mansion to cover legal fees, bills and child support payments after his wages were withheld.

"I struggled to pay my child support, I felt awful," the footballer said in a witness statement. "Raheem Sterling, Bernardo Silva and Riyad Mahrez all lent me money to help me try and pay my legal fees and support my family."

Mendy, who now plays for French Ligue 2 club Lorient, claimed to have been assured by a senior City official he would receive his unpaid wages once he had been cleared of the charges. The club continued paying Mendy's £500,000 a month salary following his first arrest in November 2020, but argued they did not have to after he was charged because of his bail conditions and a Football Association suspension meant he was not able to perform his duties as a player.

"At no point have Manchester City apologised to me or even acknowledged how their actions almost cost me everything," added Mendy's witness statement. "I believe that it is fair and just for me to be paid the wages that I would have earned but for being falsely arrested for crimes that I did not commit."

SPOTLIGHT

Team Qatar to debut at FIA Motorsport Games

Seven talented drivers will represent Qatar in five categories in Valencia

By Sports Reporter
Doha

In a landmark moment for Qatar's motorsport scene, seven talented drivers will represent the nation at the prestigious FIA Motorsport Games 2024. The announcement came during a special event held at Lusail International Circuit (LIC) yesterday, marking Qatar's first-ever participation in this global competition.

The FIA Motorsport Games, often hailed as the "Olympics of motorsport", will take place from October 23-27 in Valencia, Spain. This third edition of the games promises to be the largest yet, featuring 26 categories and attracting over 1,000 athletes from more than 100 countries.

Qatar's team for the FIA Motorsport Games comprises of 7 talented drivers across 5 categories including Bader al-Sulaiti (F4 driver), Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (Rally 2 Gravel driver) and his co-driver Nasser al-Kuwari, Ghanim al-Ali (GT), Ibrahim Abdulghani (GT), Saif al-Obaidli (Karting Mini) and Khalid al-Maraghi (Esports GT).

Amro al-Hamad, CEO of Lusail International Circuit said: "As a nation with a growing passion for motorsports, these drivers will represent Qatar on an international stage, showcasing their skill, determination, and the months of preparation."

He added: "From F4 to Rally, GT, Karting, and even Esports, our drivers come from diverse disciplines, united by one goal: to make Qatar proud. Their commitment and dedication are unmatched, and we are confident that their hard work will be on full display in Valencia."

It's not just about participating in the event. The drivers are well prepared and we have high expectations. We will continue to participate in this event as we are concentrating on younger generation which is our future," al-Hamad said.

These talented drivers have undergone rigorous preparation, including intensive races, testing sessions, and a dedicated training camp in Europe this past summer, organised and supported by the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF). Their



President of the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation and Lusail International Circuit Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai and QMMF Executive Director and CEO of LIC Amro al-Hamad pose with members of Team Qatar, who will take part in the FIA Motorsport Games from October 23-27 in Valencia, Spain.

participation marks a significant milestone in Qatar's motorsport journey.

Khalid al-Maraghi, competing in the Esports GT category, emphasised the team's commitment to daily training in the lead-up to the event. Al-Maraghi stated: "Our goal is to compete at the highest level, striving for victory and making Qatar proud on the global stage."

Ghanim al-Ali said it would be a proud moment for the entire team to represent

Qatar. "This is going to be a new challenge and we are looking forward to a strong performance," he said.

Saif al-Obaidli, the youngest member in Team Qatar, was also optimistic of good results. "I have competed in competitions in Dubai and Italy and I am ready for this new challenge," he said.

The FIA Motorsport Games, jointly organised by the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) and SRO Motorsports

Group, has seen remarkable growth since its inception in 2019. The event brings together athletes from across the globe, fostering a unique spirit of sporting competition under national flags.

These seven drivers in the FIA Motorsport Games are set to inspire a new generation of Qatari motorsport enthusiasts. Their dedication and skill will form the backbone of the country's motorsport scene, both internationally and locally.

FOCUS

Visit Qatar to sponsor Qatar World Padel Championship

Qatar Padel Federation has announced the signing of a new partnership with Visit Qatar, which will sponsor the upcoming Qatar World Padel Championship, scheduled to take place from October 28-November 2. The agreement was signed on behalf of the federation by Tareq Zainal, Secretary-General of the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Badminton, and Padel Federation, and on behalf of Visit Qatar by its CEO Abdulaziz al-Mawlawi.

Zainal expressed his happiness at signing the partnership with Visit Qatar, emphasising that this collaboration will help promote this major global event and attract more attention to it, thereby enhancing the development of sports tourism in Qatar.

He noted that this sponsorship reflects Visit Qatar's continuous efforts to support local and international sporting events hosted by Qatar, given its outstanding organizational capabilities and world-class infrastructure. He also expressed his hope that this partnership will extend to other areas of co-operation in the future.

Al-Mawlawi stated: "We are delighted



Secretary-General of the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Badminton, and Padel Federation Tareq Zainal (left) and Visit Qatar CEO Abdulaziz al-Mawlawi.

to partner with the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Badminton, and Padel Federation as a golden sponsor of the Padel World Championship, as part of our commitment to supporting sports."

He added: "Qatar's hosting of the championship for the second time confirms the nation's capabilities, resources, and legacy, as well as its ability to organize major international tournaments. Such championships contribute to overall tourism growth, and we are close to achieving our goal of welcoming 6mn visitors after hosting 4 million in 2023."

He concluded: "We hope the championship delivers the desired success and that visitors enjoy their time during the event, making it a memorable experience for everyone."

This will be the second time the championship is held in Qatar, with the first being in 2021, which was a great success. The World Padel Championship is the most prominent event on the International Padel Federation's calendar, featuring separate categories for men and women.

This new edition, held at Khalifa International Complex, will see the participation of 16 national teams in each category. The total prize pool for the championship is 500,000 euros, distributed equally between the men's and women's categories and among all the finalist teams.

Nigeria boycott AFCON qualifier in Libya

Abuja: The Nigeria Football Federation said it will fly the national team back home after alleged "inhumane treatment" in Libya ahead of a 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) qualifier.

"Players have resolved not to play the match any longer as NFF (the Nigerian federation) officials are making plans to fly the team back home," said NFF director of communications, Ademola Olajire.

A formal complaint by Nigeria has been sent to the Confederation of African football (CAF) whose disciplinary board is now investigating the incident. The Nigerian team have been held at an abandoned airport in Libya for more than 15 hours since their chartered flight landed on Sunday.

The Nigerian embassy in Libya reportedly cannot intervene as they would need permission to do so from the Libyan government. Captain William Troost-Ekong said the team will not play the game and they will not make a three-hour bus ride from Al-Abraq to Benina, where the qualifier was scheduled to be played today, for safety reasons.

"As the team captain together with the team we have decided that we will NOT play this game," he posted on social media. "Let them have the points. We will not accept to travel anywhere by road here even with security it's not safe. We can only imagine what the hotel or food would be like given to us if we continued."

CAF said they viewed "the disturbing and unacceptable experiences of the Nigerian National Team at an airport in Libya in a very serious light".

The statement added that CAF had been in contact with both the Libyan and Nigerian authorities. "Appropriate action will be taken against those who violated the CAF Statutes and Regulations" the statement concluded.

The Libyan football federation denied any impropriety, saying in a statement it had the "utmost respect" for Nigeria. "There are no grounds to accuse the Libyan security teams or the Libyan Football Federation of deliberately orchestrating this incident," it said. "Such actions are inconsistent with our values and principles. We firmly reject any claims that suggest foul play or sabotage in this situation."

Former African footballer of the year Victor Ikpeba, who accompanied the Nigeria team to Libya, has urged for stiff sanctions against Libya and supported the decision to boycott the match.

"If CAF know their job, Libya ought to be banned from international football," he said.

"This is a high-risk country and one really wonders who approved for Libya to be playing their games at home. I played for the Super Eagles for 10 years and I never experienced what I have in Libya in the last hours. The team are not safe, those of us travelling with them are also not safe," he added.

"We were locked up in an abandoned airport for more than 10 hours like hostages. The team will call off their bluff and not play this match."

On Friday, Nigeria beat Libya 1-0 in the southern city of Uyo. They lead Group D with seven points from three matches, while Libya are bottom of the standings on one point.

BOTTOMLINE

GWC signs sponsorship agreement with Qatar Billiard Sports Federation

Gulf Warehousing Company QPSC (GWC) - one of the fastest-growing logistics businesses in the Mena region, has officially signed a one-year sponsorship agreement with the Qatar Billiard Sports Federation (QBSF). The agreement was signed by Matthew Kearns, Deputy CEO of GWC, and Mohammed al-Ramzani, President of QBSF.

Expressing his delight after the signing, Kearns, Deputy CEO of GWC, said: "This partnership marks a significant national contribution to the QBSF and the broader Qatari sports scene. We believe it will positively impact the federation's upcoming initiatives, setting the stage for future success. Our sponsorship is aligned with GWC's Corporate Social Responsibility strategy, which emphasizes sports as a cornerstone of human development, in-line with Qatar National Vision 2030 and its focus on nurturing human potential."

GWC's social responsibility initiatives focus on youth, education, sports, culture, knowledge creation, and entrepreneurship, contributing to the development of sustainable ecosystems that benefit the community and allow talents to thrive.

He added: "GWC is dedicated to enhancing Qatar's global sports presence by



Gulf Warehousing Company and Qatar Billiard Sports Federation officials pose for a picture.

supporting a diverse range of athletic initiatives. Qatar has already demonstrated its ability to host major international events, such as the FIFA World Cup 2022, and has developed a world-class sports infrastructure, making it the sports capital of the world."

Al-Ramzani, President of QBSF, stated:

"We are proud of our partnership with GWC, a shining example of national support from the private sector for Qatari sports. This collaboration will play a crucial role in the success of the federation's activities. We look forward to continuing this partnership in future tournaments and competitions, especially as we sup-

port our billiards and snooker players in global championships."

He added: "GWC's commitment, stemming from its national role, to sponsor and support Qatar's sporting events is commendable. I am confident that this partnership will strengthen our efforts to develop billiards and snooker in Qatar while

further solidifying Qatar's position as a global sports leader."

GWC's significant achievements include its prominent role during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, where it served as the first regional supporter and official logistics provider for the tournament. GWC sports played a pivotal role in delivering top-tier logistics services for major sporting events in Qatar since 2006 to the present, leveraging its extensive logistics infrastructure that enables seamless operations from point of entry to point of use, along with an integrated freight network of diverse offices worldwide.

GWC is one of the fastest-growing logistics businesses in the Mena region that offers best-in-class logistics and supply chain services.

As the largest private sector developer of logistics hubs in the region, GWC has constructed over 4mn square metres of world-class logistics infrastructure, serving both local and international clients, while continually bidding on new projects and management agreements.

These hubs offer a wide range of services across various sectors on a 3PL and 4PL basis, with specialized hubs catering to industries like oil and gas in Ras Laffan and Messaieed industrial cities.