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QOC PRESIDENT ATTENDS OPENING CEREMONY OF ARABIAN GULF CUP



Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) president HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani attended the opening ceremony of the Arabian Gulf Cup 26 that kicked off in Kuwait City yesterday. Qatar are one of the eight sides competing in the Dec 21-Jan 3 tournament. FIFA president Gianni Infantino also met with the QOC president.

ARABIAN GULF CUP 26

Afif on target as Qatar share points with UAE in opener

Hosts Kuwait and Oman play entertaining 1-1 draw as region's most popular tournament kicks off



Qatar's Akram Afif celebrates scoring his team's goal in the first half against UAE in their Group A opening match of the Arabian Gulf Cup 26 in Kuwait City yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Kuwait City

A first-half strike by Akram Afif yesterday helped Qatar share points with United Arab Emirates (UAE) in their opening match of the Arabian Gulf Cup 26.

Yahya al-Ghassani produced the equaliser in their Group A clash just before the end of the first half at Jaber Al-Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Stadium.

In another match yesterday, hosts Kuwait and Oman also played a 1-1 draw.

Yesterday's 1-1 draw was new coach Luis Garcia's first match in charge of the Qatar side. During the second half, Garcia was shown a yellow card by the referee.

Qatar midfielder Tareq Salman said after the match yesterday: "It was a fighting match for us. Thank God, we managed a good result. We had chances to score more goals. I think we dominated the match. Yes, we could have scored some more goals."

Afif looked in fine form throughout the match with his threatening moves especially in the first half. The Asian Cup hero



Kuwait players celebrate their goal against Oman yesterday. The match ended in a 1-1 draw.

arrived in Kuwait less than 24 hours ago. Qatar opened the scoring through Afif who converted a penalty in the 17th minute.

Earlier the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup kicked off with an exciting but evenly matched encounter as Oman and hosts Kuwait battled to a 1-1 draw at Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium.

The atmosphere was electric as Kuwait took an early lead. In the 34th minute, Yousef al-Su-

laiman rose above Mohammed al-Musalami to powerfully head home from a corner, sending the stadium into a frenzy. The hosts, sensing victory, pressed forward with renewed vigour, but Oman remained composed.

Just before halftime, Jameel al-Yahmadi threaded a brilliant pass through the Kuwait defence, finding Issam al-Sabhi who calmly slotted the ball past the goalkeeper, silencing the home crowd.

DAZZLING OPENING CEREMONY MARKS START OF GULF CUP



Fireworks light up the Kuwait City night sky during the opening ceremony of the Arabian Gulf Cup 26 yesterday. A total of eight teams namely hosts Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Bahrain, defending champions Iraq, Oman and the UAE are taking part in the Dec 21-Jan 3 tournament.

Kuwait City: The Arabian Gulf Football Cup Gulf (Khaleeji Zain 26) competitions commenced yesterday evening at Jaber International Stadium.

The event featured a spectacular opening ceremony that showcased artistic performances reflecting both the Gulf heritage of the past and the vision for the future.

The ceremony began with an inspiring speech by the tournament sponsor, the Amir Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, followed by the national anthem of Kuwait.

Throughout the opening ceremony, the lives of the people of Kuwait and other Gulf countries were depicted, focusing on their historical relationship with the sea, which served as a source of livelihood for previous generations.

Desert life, symbolised by the camel, was also highlighted in a captivating presentation that embraced the tournament's slogan "The Future is Gulf". The event showcased stunning artistic displays that represented the ancient heritage of the Arab Gulf countries, infused with modern artistic elements that conveyed a unified Gulf vision for a bright future.

Notably, Gulf boats were featured, symbolizing the region's present and future. The ceremony merged traditional Gulf folk arts with modern technology, engagingly presenting a common Gulf identity. Kuwaiti artist Bashar al-Shatti and Saudi artist Ayed performed a beautiful artistic operetta set against vibrant backgrounds featuring the championship cup, coffee pot, and incense burner.

The event conveyed powerful messages through visual displays that illustrated the unity of the Gulf's destiny and the shared vision connecting the



region's peoples under one banner. It concluded with a stunning fireworks display that captivated the audience. A total of eight teams are taking part in the Dec 21-Jan 3 tournament.

KUNA

MOTORSPORT

MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup wraps up in style

More than 150 drivers representing 16 countries from the Middle East and North Africa participated in the event

Agencies
Doha

The MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup 2024, hosted by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) for the second time, wrapped up with a display of regional talent and racing action.

The championship was held from December 19 to 21 where more than 150 drivers from 16 different countries from the Middle East and North Africa region participated.

Marking the success of the championship, FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem said, "The MENA Karting Nations Cup is an opportunity for us to showcase the best of our region. It brings global attention to MENA motorsport while offering young talent the honour of representing their nations. My congratulations to all competitors - the racing this week has been exemplary - an important step on their motorsport journey. With winners represented from across our region, it is clear the future of MENA motorsport is strong."

"Thanks to QMMF President Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai for hosting such a successful event, alongside the volunteers, staff and officials, who have dedicated their time and effort," he said.

The champions were awarded their titles in a vibrant closing ceremony.

Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai, President of QMMF and Lusail International Circuit said, "We are honored to host the MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup 2024 for the second consecutive year at LIC."

"The MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup provides a platform and empowers drivers,



All the winners celebrate with their trophies at the end of the MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup 2024 yesterday.



Action from the MENA Karting Championship Nations Cup 2024.

especially the young emerging talent, to display their skills. We extend our gratitude to all the par-

ticipating nations and the talented drivers. I would also like to thank the FIA President Mohammed Ben

Sulayem for his continuous effort to empower the youth through this championship."

from Lebanon in P2, clocking 16 minutes 59.712 seconds, and Saif al-Obaidli from Qatar in P3 with a time of 17 minutes 05.162 seconds.

Junior Max: Nathan Kappen from the UAE led the grid and secured P1, followed by Malek Mustafa from Palestine in P2 and Veer Chopra from UAE in P3, with times of 20 minutes 08.954 seconds, 21 minutes 08.364 seconds, and 21 minutes 08.499 seconds, respectively.

Senior Max: In the Senior Max category, Sanad al-Hamawi from Jordan claimed P1 with an impressive time of 20 minutes 58.907 seconds. He was followed closely by Anis Tazi from Morocco, who secured P2 with a time of 21 minutes 06.771 seconds, and Zain El Homossany from Egypt, who completed the podium in P3 with a time of 21 minutes 07.033 seconds.

DD2: Christopher Njeim from Lebanon, Taha Hassiba from Qatar, and Souhil Khatal from Algeria claimed P1, P2, and P3, respectively, with times of 20 minutes 42.371 seconds, 20 minutes 43.037 seconds, and 20 minutes 45.762 seconds.

DD2 Masters: Sofiane Salhi from Algeria, Faisal al-Yaefi from Qatar, and Abdo El Feghali from Lebanon claimed P1, P2, and P3, respectively, with times of 20 minutes 48.947 seconds, 20 minutes 55.695 seconds, and 21 minutes 05.897 seconds.

R390 Endurance: Team Morocco secured P1 in the R390 Endurance category, followed by the UAE in P2 and Algeria in P3, respectively.

R390 Sprint: Lebanon dominated this category with Mathias Njeim (Lebanon) and Jad al-Awar (Lebanon) securing P1 and P2, clocking in times of 19 minutes 51.620 seconds and 19 minutes 55.099 seconds, respectively. Mahdi Kadri from Morocco secured P3 with a time of 19 minutes 55.272 seconds.

To mark exceptional performance and skills throughout the championship, three teams were awarded the "MENA Nations Cup" accolade from which Lebanon won first position, Morocco ranked second and the UAE secured the third position overall.

RESULTS:

Micro Max: The UAE dominated the category, with Ava Lawrence and Atiqa Asif Mir, both from the UAE, securing P1 and P2 with times of 17 minutes 39.551 seconds and 17 minutes 40.738 seconds, respectively. Nahyl El Gahoudi from Morocco claimed P3 with a time of 17 minutes 43.383 seconds.

Mini Max: Faris Haroun from UAE, secured P1 with a time of 16 minutes 56.733 seconds. He was followed by Joe Mourad

CRICKET

Teen Ghazanfar shines as Afghanistan win ODI series



Afghanistan players celebrate with the trophy after winning the ODI series against Zimbabwe yesterday.

AFP
Harare

Teenage spinner Allah Ghazanfar took five for 33 as Afghanistan overwhelmed Zimbabwe by eight wickets yesterday for a 2-0 one-day international series win.

The 18-year-old followed up a six-wicket haul against Bangladesh last month with a man-of-the-match show in Harare as the tourists crushed the hosts for the second time in three days.

The opening ODI in the three-match series was washed out on Tuesday. Zimbabwe were put in to bat by Afghanistan captain Hashmatullah Shahidi and, with the exception of veteran Sean Wil-

liams, who made 60 from 61 balls, flopped to be all out of 127.

Sediqullah Atal, fresh from a maiden ODI century on Thursday, top-scored with 52 as Afghanistan cruised to 131 for two in just 26.5 overs and completed a white-ball double after a Twenty20 series win. It was the seventh ODI series triumph for Afghanistan over Zimbabwe with one drawn.

"It is wonderful to see youngsters like Allah coming into the team and making such a big impact," Shahidi told reporters.

"Allah is doing very well for the team and, hopefully, he can maintain this momentum and bowl well going forward."

Wreaking havoc with his off-break deliveries, Ghazanfar continued a memorable year in which

he was part of the Kolkata Knight Riders squad that won the Indian Premier League. Star leg spinner Rashid Khan also tormented the hosts, taking three for 38 as the fragility of the Zimbabwe batters was exposed again. They were all out for 54 two days ago.

Williams, whose 61-ball knock included three sixes and six fours, was among only three Zimbabweans to reach double figures.

The top Zimbabwe scorer departed when his reverse sweep shot off Khan was caught by 39-year-old Mohammed Nabi at first slip.

Atal and Abdul Malik put on 84 for the first wicket before both fell in the space of 10 balls, leaving Shahidi (20 not out) to seal victory with 139 balls to spare.

A brilliant catch at deep extra cover by Brian Bennett spelt the end for Atal.

Earlier, Malik got an inside edge to a Richard Ngarava delivery, which uprooted his leg stump. The teams now move to southern city Bulawayo for a two-Test series, with the first starting on December 26.

BRIEF SCORES: Zimbabwe 127 in 30.1 overs (S. Williams 60; Allah Ghazanfar 5-33, Rashid Khan 3-38) v Afghanistan 131-2 in 26.5 overs (Sediqullah Atal 52, Abdul Malik 29, Hashmatullah Shahidi 20 not out)

Result: Afghanistan win by eight wickets
Series: Afghanistan win 2-0
Toss: Afghanistan.

FOCUS

India's Jadeja seeks more runs from top order to relieve pressure

Reuters
Melbourne

Indian all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja has called for a stronger batting display from the heavyweights atop the order to ease the pressure on the team when they take on Australia in the fourth Test starting in Melbourne next week.

The tourists eked out a draw in the rain-interrupted third game in Brisbane despite another top order failure, leaving the five-match series locked at 1-1 before the highly anticipated Boxing Day clash.

Jadeja helped India avoid the follow-on with a crucial 77 lower down the order in the first innings but said it was time for the specialists to fire.

"When you play outside India, especially in Australia or South Africa, it's important for the top order to make runs," Jadeja told reporters at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"If the top order doesn't make runs or give us a good start, then definitely there is more pressure

and responsibility on the lower and middle order. Hopefully in this match they do well.

"As a team, we need them to perform. If everyone contributes in the batting unit, the team will do well."

Jadeja said India were pleased to be level with Australia at this stage with matches to come in Melbourne and Sydney, as they look to win a third successive series Down Under.

"The next two matches will be interesting," he added.

"If we win one match we retain the series, we obviously won the last two series here. It's a good opportunity. This will be a crucial match."

Jadeja said he and India will miss the experience of spin spearhead Ravichandran Ashwin, who retired after the previous game, but said there is no shortage of talent in the country.

"Hopefully we'll get another good bowler and all-rounder... we have to move on," Jadeja said.

"It's a good opportunity now for any youngster who comes into the team to prove themselves at this level!"



HORSE RACING

Kerindia lands Sawda Natheel Stakes Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Kerindia sparked in the Sawda Natheel Stakes Cup as the Injaaz Stud-owned filly returned to winning ways with a stunning pillar-to-post performance at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Trained by Zuhair Mohsen and expertly ridden by Gavin Matt Ryan, the four-year-old dominated the 1,200m race for Thoroughbred Fillies & Mares, finding an extra gear in the home stretch to unleash devastating speed and win by impressive five lengths.

Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, crowned the winners.

Also during the seven-race third Al Uqda Race Meeting, Ray'q won the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 80-100 under Lukas Delozier, while Hamad al-Jehani-trained Thunder Flow, ridden by Arnaud De Lepine, reigned supreme in the Thoroughbred Handicap 0-90.

Meanwhile, the Local Thor-



Team of Kerindia celebrates after the filly won the Sawda Natheel Stakes Cup yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

oughbred Handicap 35-55 (Class 5) saw Toyota with Alberto Sanna in the saddle emerging fastest while Szczepan Mazur guided Handsome Chap to Thoroughbred Maiden Plate victory.

Jockey Jefferson Smith also registered a win yesterday when he rode Naseeb Zakhir to Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate title after Minsk had prevailed in the

opening race – the Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate – under Fayos Martin Borja.

RESULTS
3rd Al Uqda Race Meeting - Sawda Natheel Stakes
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Sawda Natheel Stakes - Thoroughbred (Fillies & Mares)

(Class 2) (Rail out 3 metre)
Kerindia, Zuhair Mohsen, Gavin Matt Ryan
2 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 80-100 (Class 2) (Rail out 3 metre)
Ray'q, Rudy Andre Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
3 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-90 (3yo only) (Class 3) (Rail out 3 metre)



Jockey Gavin Matt Ryan guided Kerindia to victory yesterday.

Thunder Flow, Hamad al-Jehani, Arnaud De Lepine
4 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap 35-55 (Class 5) (Rail out 3 metre)
Toyota, Saeed al-Shafi, Alberto Sanna
5 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6) (Rail out 3 mre)
Handsome Chap, Hamad al-

Jehani, Szczepan Mazur
6 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate (Class 6) (Rail out 3 metre)
Naseeb Zakhir, Osama al-Dafea, Jefferson Smith
7 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate (Class 6) (Rail out 3 metre)
Minsk, Mohamed Khaled Elahmed, Fayos Martin Borja

LONGINES HATHAB QATAR EQUESTRIAN TOUR

Bassem wins Big Tour Class with F One Usa

Saudi's al-Hadi emerges victorious in Open Class



Bassem Hassan Mohammed (centre) receives the Big Tour of Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab winner's trophy from Ali Yousef al-Rumaihi, Assistant Secretary-General of QEF, at Al Shaqab yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatari rider Bassem Hassan Mohammed dominated the Big Tour field to seal the victory aboard F One Usa, while Saudi Arabia's Hassan al-Hadi emerged victorious in the Open Class astride Caepen, on the final day of the eighth round of Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour yesterday.

At the Longines Outdoor Arena at Al Shaqab, Bassem, completed the course flawlessly in 65.95 seconds to secure the top prize, while Khalid Mohammed al-Emadi and Chikitaa earned the runner-up position with a time of 69.56 seconds, including a 4-point penalty.

Bassem made another podium appearance, finishing third with Thor ter wilgen z despite receiving a 4-point penalty and clocking



Qatari rider Khalid Mohammed al-Emadi astride Chikitaa in action during the Big Tour of Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab yesterday.

71.65 seconds. In the Open Class, al-Hadi emerged victorious delivering a penalty-free routine in two phases with remarkable times of 34.25 and 25.11 seconds.

Qatar's al-Emadi, riding Mira, came second after completing his two phases in 33.50 and 26.18 seconds. Hussain Saeed Haidan,

astride D Saucedo, claimed the third place with times of 30.82 and 26.58 seconds.

Salman Faisal al-Marri and his bay mare Sita came first in the Future Riders 60cm class, while Mohammed Faisal al-Marri and Soul Rebel won the Future Riders 80cm event.

HORSE SHOW

Drahim Al Bahya, Nwair Al Qasmiah adjudged best



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Drahim Al Bahya of Al Jood Stud was adjudged as best in the Mares 4-6 Years Old 7A class while Alkaydah Al Sraiya of Al Sraiya Stud was first in 7B class of the same category on the third and penultimate day of Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC)'s 4th Doha B International Arabian Horse Show being held at the outdoor arena of Qatar Equestrian Federation.

QREC's Deputy Show Director Saad Ali al-Kubaisi presented the awards to the winners of Mares 4-6 Years Old 7A class.

In the Mares 7-10 Years Old class 8A, Nwair Al Qasmiah, owned by Ibrahim bin Suleiman al-Qasim, stood first while D Fala of Al Salem Stud was best in 8B class.

The winners qualify for the championship classes which will be on show in the finals today.

RESULTS: Mares 7-10 Years Old Class 8A: 1. Nwair Al Qasmiah (Owned by Ibrahim bin Suleiman

al-Qasim); 2. Al Ghariya Al Shaqab (Nasser Mohammed al-Hajri); 3. Maharaani (Al Lateef Stud).

Class 8B: 1. D Fala (Al Salem Stud); 2. Tamure MS (Al Jamal Stud); 3. Mayar IV (Sultan Bin Mohammed Ghoshean).

Mares 4-6 Years Old Class 7A: 1. Drahim Al Bahya (Al Jood Stud); 2. Maaly (Ebrahim Yusuf al-Romaihi); 3. Mayaar Al Omariya (Falah Hussain Falah al-Ajmi).
Class 7B: 1. Alkaydah Al Sraiya (Al Sraiya Stud); 2. Sajja Al Fairozah (Ibrahem Nabeel Alshekh Mubarak).



TIGER IN FAMILY GOLF EVENT BUT HAS 'LONG WAY' BEFORE PGA RETURN

Tiger Woods will play alongside his 15-year-old son Charlie in this week's PNC Championship, but the 15-time major winner said Friday his PGA Tour return remains distant.

The 36-hole parent-child tournament at Ritz-Carlton Golf Club in Orlando will be the first quasi-competitive event for Woods since he underwent back surgery in September.

Back trouble and leg injuries from a 2021 car crash have limited Woods' ability to play in the regular tournaments he once dominated.

"My leg is what it is. It's still here," said Woods, who turns 49 on December 30. "But this year I

struggled a lot with my back and it's a lot better, but I still have a long way to go."

Woods was 60th at the Masters and missed the cut in the year's other three majors, struggling to recover form between rounds. In his only other start this year, Woods withdrew after one round at the Genesis Invitational, the February event he hosts at Riviera. "The recovery has gotten to be the hardest part," Woods said.

"But over the course of rounds, weeks, months, it gets harder." Even getting his surgically repaired body ready to compete is difficult.

"Preparing for competitive play is different. That takes months,

weeks," Woods said. "But it starts with each and every day. You just do the little things correctly and they add up."

Tiger Woods was 60th at the Masters and missed the cut in the year's other three majors

"It's frustrating. It's hard. I have an amazing team, amazing support. But I have to do the little things on a daily basis and away from everybody. It's hard." Woods has been impressed with top-ranked Scottie Scheffler, who won nine times this year including a second Masters and Paris Olympic gold. It's a domination unseen since Woods in his heyday.

"How he has handled the pressure and the expectations for he and his family, I think he's doing an unbelievable job," Woods said. "He's just coming into his own. This is the fun part of watching him develop."

"This is going to be the start of an unbelievable year," he said, Woods said a commonality in their success styles is avoiding errors.

"It's not making that many mistakes," Woods said. "Over the course of big events, lots of play at an elite level, not making mistakes adds up."

Woods, who shares the record of 82 PGA Tour wins with Sam Snead, has a new rival to challenge him in Charlie Woods, who recently

defeated his dad over nine holes. "He beat me for nine holes. He has yet to beat me for 18 holes," Woods said. "That day is coming. I'm just prolonging it as long as I possibly can. "We have so much fun out there. It'll be a fun atmosphere tomorrow and we're just going to have a blast."

This week marks the fifth time the Woods duo has played in the event, with a runner-up finish in 2001 their best showing. They were fifth last year.

Woods hopes playing this week can be a step back to competing once more.

"I'm not competitive right now, but I just want to be able to have the experience again," Woods said.

"This has always been one of the bigger highlights of the year for us as a family.

"We want to win, but it's about the bond. It's about having the family. It's about us having a father-son moment together."

His next competition is planned for January's launch of TGL, the six-team tech-golf league developed by Woods and Rory McIlroy. It features a specially built arena with video screens and rotating greens.

"It's absolutely incredible. The rotating green blew me away," Woods said. "I think it's going to be a lot of fun for not just us but also the fan experience."

(AFP)

ARABIAN GULF CUP 26

Saudi eye win against Bahrain in Group B opener

By Sports Reporter
Kuwait City

Asian football powerhouse Saudi Arabia, coached by Frenchman Herve Renard, will be aiming for a win against Bahrain when the two regional sides play their opening match at Arabian Gulf Cup 26.

Renard, who guided Saudi Arabia to a famous win over Lionel Messi-led Argentina at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, yesterday said his team is eager to win the eight-team tournament that began yesterday.

Saudi Arabia are in Group B with Bahrain, Yemen and defending champions Iraq.

"We are here to participate effectively and win," Renard said at a press conference yesterday.

"This tournament provides a great platform to work with the players and prepare them for future competitions."

"I accepted this challenge because I believe in the players' ca-



Saudi Arabia's coach Herve Renard and Bahrain's coach Dragan Talajic (right) address the media yesterday in Kuwait City.

pabilities," he added. "We must work with team spirit and focus on improvement in the coming

period," Renard said. "(Defender) Hassan Tambakti is fully fit for the Arabian Gulf Cup matches,"



Renard said. However, star player Salem al-Dawsari is still recovering, the coach added.

Renard said striker Firas al-Brikan's participation remains uncertain due to injury.

Renard acknowledged the challenges ahead. He emphasized the importance of a strong start against Bahrain today to set the tone for the tournament.

Bahrain's coach Dragan Talajic, during the pre-match press conference, said: "This tournament is entirely different from the World Cup qualifiers. It's a combined competition, and we need to approach every match to win."

He confirmed the absence of player Ali Haram due to injury but expressed hope for his quick return. "This is a new challenge, and we aim to showcase beautiful football and make a strong opening statement," Talajic said.

Bahrain's star player Mohammed Marhoon emphasized the Gulf Cup's significance as a prestigious combined tournament.

"We aim to represent Bahrain with distinction," he said, extending gratitude to the Kuwait fans for their support.

"I hope to be an exemplary ambassador for Bahraini football here in Kuwait," he said.

DEFENDING CHAMPS IRAQ NOT TO TAKE YEMEN LIGHTLY IN OPENING CLASH

Kuwait City: Coach of defending champions Iraq Casas yesterday said his team won't be taking Yemen lightly when they face-off in the Arabian Gulf Cup 26 clash today.

"Our first match against Yemen is very important. They are an organised team and I have been impressed by them, especially their midfield. We will have to be at our best in this tournament," Casas said during a press conference yesterday.

"Our preparation has been good despite some problems due to injuries and the inability of some players to join, but we are ready for the tournament," Casas said.

"In the Gulf Cup, we are trying to test young players and prepare them to see if we can benefit from them in the coming period, for example, in the World Cup qualifiers.

"When we won the Gulf Cup in Basra

there was overwhelming joy that spread throughout the country, so we want to repeat that and bring the cup to Baghdad and bring joy to the faces of the Iraqi people. Both groups are difficult and the competition will be fierce. In the past, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were somewhat superior, but today you find the UAE, Bahrain, Oman and Iraq competing as well and they are all close to each other so it will be difficult to predict who will qualify from each group," he added.

Iraq's talisman Aymen Hussein looks ahead to today's opening game. "We enter the tournament as defending champions and our goal is to retain our title and please our fans," Hussein said yesterday. "We, as a team, play with the spirit of one group, and we are committed to the instructions of the coaching staff in order to reach as far as we can in the competition.

"Every striker's ambition is to score and take all three points from each match. It is not only me, but all the players enter each match with the same ambition to achieve maximum points," he added. Yemen coach Nouredine Ould Ali, said yesterday: "We have picked the best side at our disposal. And we prepared well during the past period with a training program that suited our strengths." Ali added: "We are keen to start well. We want to take advantage of all available opportunities in front of us in the match. Some of our players have gained experience of playing at the Iraqi clubs and in their stadiums. We know our opponents well." Yemeni player, Abdul-Wasie al-Matari said yesterday: "We feel ready for our first match. We hope to deliver promising performances since we have good players who give their best."



Iraq coach Casas and player Aymen Hussein during a press conference yesterday.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Villa heap pain on slumping Man City as Arsenal sparkle

'I HAVE INCREDIBLE TRUST IN THE GUYS. SOME OF THEM HAVE INCREDIBLE PRIDE AND DESIRE TO DO IT'

AFP
London

Crisis-hit Manchester City slumped to an unthinkable ninth defeat in 12 matches at Aston Villa yesterday as Arsenal dismantled Crystal Palace 5-1 to reignite their Premier League title charge.

Nottingham Forest stormed Brentford's fortress to briefly climb to third in the table and Alexander Isak scored his first hat-trick in the English top flight as Newcastle ran riot at Ipswich.

City boss Pep Guardiola - in the worst spell of his managerial career - made multiple changes following last week's painful derby defeat to Manchester United but it was to no avail as his injury-hit side lost 2-1.

Jhon Duran scored his seventh Premier League goal of the season to put Villa ahead in the 16th minute and Morgan Rogers doubled the advantage for the impressive home side in the 65th minute.

Phil Foden scored his first top-flight goal of the season in stoppage time but it proved to be too little too late for the flailing champions, whose spark has vanished.

City have now lost six Premier League games in the current campaign, twice as many as they suffered during the whole of last season, when they were crowned champions for a fourth straight season.

They are realistically out of the title race already - nine points behind leaders Liverpool having played two games more, while Villa leapfrogged them into fifth spot.

Guardiola said he trusted his players to turn things around despite their shocking run of just one win from their past 12 games in all competitions. "It depends on us," he told the BBC. "The solution is bring the players back. We have just one central defender fit, that is difficult."

"We have to think positive and I have incredible trust in the guys,"



Aston Villa's Jhon Duran celebrates scoring their first goal against Manchester City during their Premier League match in Birmingham yesterday. (Reuters)

he added. "Some of them have incredible pride and desire to do it. We have to find a way, step by step, sooner or later to find a way back."

Arsenal, who had drawn their previous two Premier League matches, had a tricky-looking tie at in-form Palace, three days after beating the same side 3-2 in the League Cup quarter-finals.

But Gabriel Jesus, who scored a hat-trick at the Emirates on Wednesday, scored two more and there were also goals for Kai

Havertz, Gabriel Martinelli and substitute Declan Rice.

Palace forward Ismaila Sarr, who had pulled his team level at 1-1, failed to make the most of two inviting opportunities early in the second half, which could have changed the complexion of the game.

Arsenal are just three points behind Liverpool, who are in action at Tottenham today, but Arne Slot's men have played two games fewer.

Forest won their third consecutive Premier League match to keep up their push for European football, condemning Brentford to their first home defeat this season.

Ola Aina slotted home the opener towards the end of the first half and Anthony Elanga made it 2-0 early in the second period.

"It's about enjoying the moment," said Forest coach Nuno Espirito Santo. "It's a very hard competition. Every game is so difficult and the next one is going to



Arsenal's Brazilian striker Gabriel celebrates after scoring his team's second goal against Crystal Palace in London yesterday. (AFP)

be very tough. "We're very proud of all the things we've been able to achieve, but we've achieved nothing yet," he said.

Newcastle deepened Ipswich's plight and lifted themselves to seventh in the table with a 4-0 win at Portman Road.

Isak volleyed Eddie Howe's team ahead in the first minute and Jacob Murphy doubled their lead before Isak side-footed in from close range just before the break.

The Sweden international scored his third nine minutes into the second half, poking the ball home after more fine work from

Murphy. It was a ninth defeat in 17 games for Ipswich since they returned to the Premier League and they remain in the relegation zone, two points from safety.

Mats Wieffer gave Brighton a 51st-minute lead against West Ham at the London Stadium but Mohammed Kudus equalised seven minutes later and the match finished 1-1.

Away from yesterday's action, Premier League basement club Southampton named former Roma and Torino boss Ivan Juric as their new manager, replacing the sacked Russell Martin.