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GULF TIMES

SPORT

Sheikh Joaan chairs OCA Executive Board meeting ahead of Asian Games in Nagoya



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), chaired the 110th meeting of the Council's Executive Board in Nagoya, ahead of the Opening Ceremony of the 20th Asian Games Aichi-Nagoya 2026. The Executive Board reviewed preparations for the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games Riyadh 2026, the Asian Beach Games Cebu 2028 and the Asian Winter Games Almaty 2029. It also considered the Kuwait Olympic Committee's request to host the inaugural Asian Esports and Mind Sports Games in 2027. The hosting agreement is scheduled to be signed today. The Board further reviewed a request from the Philippine Olympic Committee to host the second edition of the Games in Manila in 2029. The proposal will be discussed at the OCA General Assembly meeting in Doha in January 2027.

ASIAN GAMES

Al-Kuwari and al-Sharshani named Qatar's flagbearers

The opening ceremony will be held at Mizuho Park Stadium in Nagoya from 12 noon Qatar time

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The eyes of Qatar and the wider Asian sporting community will turn to Nagoya today as Mohammed Saadon al-Kuwari and Reem al-Sharshani carry the Qatari flag at the opening ceremony of the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games.

The opening ceremony will be held at Mizuho Park Stadium in Nagoya from 6pm local time (12 noon Qatar time).

For al-Kuwari, captain of Qatar's padel team, and shooter al-Sharshani, being chosen as flagbearers is both an honour and a responsibility. Al-Kuwari said he was proud to have been selected for the role and honoured to represent Qatar and the national padel team at the Games.

The Aichi-Nagoya Games is the continent's biggest multi-sport event bringing together more than 11,000 athletes from 45 Asian nations and regions. The ceremony will feature artistic and cultural performances highlighting the identity of Aichi and Nagoya, Japanese culture and the diversity of the Asian continent. The Games will run until October 4, with 469 events across 43 sports and 71 disciplines. Athletes will compete for 1,407 medals during the 16-day event.

Japan is hosting the Asian Games for the third time. Tokyo hosted the 1958 edition before Hiroshima staged the Games in 1994. The event returns to Japan after a 32-year gap, with Aichi and Nagoya serving as hosts.

Qatar has sent a 427-member delegation to the Games, including 243 athletes - 184 men and 59 women. Qatari athletes will compete in 26 sports and 32 disciplines under 18 sports federations.

The Qatar team will be represented in athletics, football, basketball, 3x3 basketball, handball, volleyball, beach volleyball, squash, padel, taekwondo, judo, artistic gymnastics, golf, shooting, swimming, jiu-jitsu, esports, sailing, equestrian, karate, fencing, archery, wrestling, boxing, weightlifting and table tennis.

QATAR BOW OUT IN FOOTBALL AFTER DEFEAT TO SAUDI

Qatar's U-23 football team bowed out of the Asian Games after a 2-0 defeat by Saudi Arabia in their second Group D match yesterday.

The result was Qatar's second successive loss following a 4-1 defeat by South Korea in their opening game. Qatar started brightly against Saudi Arabia and controlled much of the opening 15 minutes, but could not turn its possession into clear scoring opportunities.

Mohammed Ali came close to creating an opening in the 18th minute when his



Mohammed Saadon al-Kuwari



Reem al-Sharshani

cross was cleared for a corner. Mohamed Khaled then produced a fine run through midfield before finding Mohammed Ali with a long pass, but the Saudi defence dealt with the danger.

Khaled was again involved in the 24th minute when he cut in from the left and sent a cross into the area, only for the Saudi defence to clear.

Qatar won a free-kick near the Saudi penalty area a minute later after Bassam Adel was brought down. Qais al-Rawi took the free-kick directly, but his effort went wide. Saudi Arabia broke the deadlock in the 38th minute when Mohammed Barnawi headed home from a corner.

Qatar went into the break 1-0 down and faced a tougher task after Saudi Arabia doubled its lead shortly after the restart. Iyad Hawsawi headed home from a set-piece in the 47th minute.

Qatar pushed forward in search of a way back into the game but could not find a breakthrough, as Saudi Arabia held on to secure the three points and progress to the quarter-finals alongside South Korea.

Qatar U-23 coach Jose Angel said his side had competed well but failed to make the most of its opportunities. "At times during the match, we were the better side and had scoring opportunities, but the game was ultimately decided by set-pieces," the Spanish coach said at the post-match press conference.

"We must accept the loss and congratulate our opponent, especially since we played a good match and competed fiercely; however, we lacked decisiveness in front of goal when opportunities arose."

Looking ahead, Jose Angel said the experience would be useful for the team's development. "Looking ahead to the U-23 Asian Cup qualifiers scheduled for June and the future, I believe this match will be a valuable experience from which we will

Qatar House opens in Nagoya ahead of Asian Games

Nagoya: The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) has opened Qatar House in Nagoya, offering visitors an insight into the country's sporting journey, culture and heritage during the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games.

Located at the TIAD Nagoya Hotel, Qatar House will welcome visitors throughout the Games, which will be held from today until October 4. Admission is free, with opening hours from 10am to noon and 1pm to 6pm daily. The venue showcases Qatar's sporting development from the Doha 2006 Asian Games to preparations for the 2030 edition, which Doha will host for the second time. Through photographs, stories and interactive displays, visitors can learn about Qatar's major sporting achievements and its athletes.

A traditional *Majlis* is at the heart of Qatar House, reflecting the country's hospitality. Visitors can enjoy Arabic coffee, tea, dates and *regag* bread while learning about Qatari traditions.

The venue also features interactive cultural activities, including *Sadu* weaving, Arabic calligraphy and henna art. Digital experiences include creating artwork inspired by Qatar and an AI-powered photography attraction that places visitors in virtual Qatari settings.

A Postcard initiative, based on artwork by Qatari artist Mubarak al-Malik, allows visitors to collect stamps at different stations and gradually complete the artwork as a souvenir. Qatar House will also host



Qatar's U-23 football team bowed out of the Asian Games after a 2-0 loss by Saudi Arabia.



celebrations for Qatari athletes who win medals during the Games.

QOC Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Bueinain said the initiative reflects Qatar's sporting development and future ambitions. "Qatar House represents a significant milestone in the journey spanning from Doha 2006 to Doha 2030, reflecting the achievements of Qatari sports and our aspirations for the future," he said.

Al-Bueinain said Qatar's experience in hosting major sporting events had helped develop its facilities, infrastructure and

national expertise. "Today, we possess an integrated ecosystem comprising facilities, infrastructure, and national expertise and talent, alongside extensive experience in planning, operations, transportation, accommodation, and services provided to athletes, delegations, and fans," he said.

He added that Qatar's participation in Aichi-Nagoya 2026 would provide an opportunity to exchange expertise with Olympic committees and sports organisations across Asia as Doha prepares for the 2030 Games.

learn a great deal. Naturally, we are deeply saddened by the defeat, particularly given the competitive level we displayed."

WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL TEAM OUT
Qatar's women's volleyball team ended its Asian Games campaign with a straight-

sets defeat by Hong Kong yesterday. Hong Kong won 25-9, 25-8, 25-12 in the third and final group stage match.

AGENDA

ICC eyes China in bid to expand cricket

AFP
Dubai

China is emerging as a key target for growth as the International Cricket Council (ICC) seeks new fans worldwide, its chief executive says.

While South Asia accounts for about 90 percent of cricket's billion-plus fans, the ICC is seeking to expand the sport's fan base by 500 million and sees China's 1.4 billion people as a potentially huge audience -- helped by the steady progress of its women's team.

"The continued success of their women's team has provided a major boost to cricket in the country," ICC chief executive Sanjog Gupta told AFP.

China became a focus market after hosting cricket at the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou and through the progress of its women's national team, which has climbed 10 places in the world



China women's cricket team.

rankings over the past two years. There is still far to go, however. In the ICC T20 rankings the women are ranked a modest 36th, while the men languish in 92nd place.

The women were also knocked out of the Asian Games on Thursday without a ball being bowled, two days before the opening ceremony.

A sodden outfield caused by days

of rain in Nagoya, Japan, prevented any play from taking place in China's morning quarter-final against Bangladesh, who went through to the semi-finals by virtue of being the higher.

Still, China is one of several markets the ICC sees as crucial to broadening cricket's appeal beyond its traditional strongholds of South Asia, England, and Aus-



ICC chief executive Sanjog Gupta.

tralia. The ICC has spent \$1.5m in China to boost the sport over the past five years.

The country now has three top-level cricket venues, including a new 1,500-seat stadium in Taicang expected to host domestic and international matches and provide a training base for the national teams.

The ICC has begun testing the

appetite for the sport in China. Some women's T20 World Cup matches were broadcast in Mandarin, and the final week of the 2026 men's T20 World Cup generated 4.4 million video views in China.

The country's potential emergence is particularly significant for the ICC because, unlike several newer cricket nations, its men's and women's teams are made up largely of homegrown players rather than players from South Asian communities.

Indonesia, a country of around 280 million people, has also been identified as a market with growth potential. Its men's team T20 ranking is 63rd, and the women's team, 23rd.

"If even segments of the population in China and Indonesia start engaging with the sport, then they could power the next leap in the scale of cricket's fandom," Gupta said.

"It can play a significant role in the sport's ambition to add 500

million fans to its global fan base, which is the ICC chair's stated ambition." The ICC believes cricket's return to the Olympics at the 2028 Los Angeles Games could provide another boost, with men's and women's T20 tournaments set to award medals for the first time since the sport's lone previous appearance in 1900.

The ICC's push into new markets has paid off elsewhere.

Italy offered a glimpse of the potential of another non-traditional market when it made its men's T20 World Cup debut earlier this year, beating Nepal and pushing England close.

The ICC push has the backing of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), custodian of the game's laws. "MCC is very pleased to be sending a women's team for an overseas tour of China in 2027," MCC director of cricket and operations Rob Lynch told AFP.

"We see this tour as a huge opportunity to be able to grow the game in China," he added.

MATCH REPORT

Head smashes ton as Australia crush Zimbabwe

The visitors take an unassailable 2-0 lead in three-match ODI series

AFP
Harare

Travis Head struck 112 to lead an Australia charge in a series-clinching 84-run win over Zimbabwe in the 2nd one-day international in Harare yesterday.

Zimbabwe's decision to insert the Australians after winning the toss backfired badly as the tourists made 356-6 in 50 overs, their highest ODI score against the southern African nation, for a 2-0 series lead.

Head was not the only Australian to star as Cooper Connolly (78) and captain Mitchell Marsh (53) both made half-centuries while Oliver Peake clubbed a quickfire 41.

In reply, Zimbabwe posted 272 in 48.3 overs with 40-year-old captain Sikandar Raza top scoring with 45. However, the hosts never came close to matching the required run rate.

"It was nice to spend some time in the middle and spend some time out there with Mitch (Marsh)," said player-of-the-match award winner Head.

"We did not train for a couple of days which was good actually. We had done a fair bit of training going into the series. It was nice to be fresh. We just tried to be aggressive."

Head, who was dismissed for just four in the first Harare ODI, hit three sixes and 15 fours off 84 deliveries.



Australia's Travis Head celebrates after scoring a century during the second one-day international against Zimbabwe at the Harare Sports Club yesterday. (AFP)

The 32-year-old opener from Adelaide took 75 balls to reach 100, an ODI record for an Australian against Zimbabwe.

HEAD'S KNOCK LIFTED AUSTRALIA

His knock lifted the visitors to 190-2 before he lofted a Wessly Madhevere delivery out to short cover where substitute Ryan Burl took the catch.

Connolly hit a second half century of the series. His 69-ball stand included three sixes and three fours before a top edge off Brad Evans was caught by

Brendan Taylor at short fine leg. Marsh had his off stump uprooted by Wellington Masakadza after a patient innings laced with three sixes and three fours.

In a fiery finish to the innings, 19-year-old Peake slammed 41 off 18 balls, including three sixes in the final over from Evans which went for 24.

Batting at No.6, Raza struck five fours before hitting Connolly down the ground to Matt Renshaw at long off.

The series at Harare Sports Club concludes tomorrow with Australia seeking a sweep. They

then head to South Africa, where they will play three ODIs from September 24, and three Tests.

BRIEF SCORES

Australia 356-6 in 50 overs (T. Head 112, C. Connolly 78, M. Marsh 53; B. Evans 3-86)
Zimbabwe 272 in 48.3 overs (S. Raza 45; C. Connolly 2-25, M. Renshaw 2-44, J. Hazlewood 2-48, A. Zampa 2-62)
Result: Australia won by 84 runs
Toss: Zimbabwe
Series: Australia have winning 2-0 lead before final match tomorrow.

SECOND T20

Record for Buttler as England hammer Sri Lanka

AFP
Cardiff

Jos Buttler became the first batsman to score 15,000 career T20 runs and Liam Dawson took a three-wicket haul as a dominant England beat Sri Lanka by six wickets in Cardiff on Thursday night to secure the series 2-0.

The hosts won Tuesday's first T20 in Southampton by 119 runs and followed it up on an overcast evening with a 14th consecutive victory over Sri Lanka in the format.

Set a target of 146, after winning the toss and opting to bowl at a murky and overcast Sophia Gardens, England had marched to 48-0 after four overs but openers Aneurin Donald (21) and Buttler (30) then walked in quick succession for 55-2.

Big-hitting captain Harry Brook smashed three sixes in one over but went for 23, well caught by a diving Eshan Malinga off a Wanindu Hasaranga delivery, before Tom Banton steadied the ship with a top scoring 52 not out from 24 balls as England cantered towards another easy win with 47 balls and 7.5 overs to spare.



England's Jos Buttler in action during the second Twenty20 International against Sri Lanka in Cardiff. (Reuters)

"Tonight was a special performance, very clinical. Sri Lanka got off to a flier but the way we fought back with the ball was outstanding," said Brook.

"The way Dawson reads the game was outstanding, too."

Buttler reached his career 15,000 with a single and Brook said his milestone was simply ridiculous.

"Long may it continue. He has been phenomenal for 15 years and someone you want by your side and in the changing room," he

added. Sri Lanka posted 145 for 9 from their 20 overs, an improvement on their previous 135 all out in 19, with opener Pathum Nissanka hitting 37 from 21 balls.

They had carved out a promising 56-0 but lost momentum with Jamie Overton taking the first wicket with a leaping catch off Player of the Match Dawson, who took his second wicket with the next ball of the sixth over and ended with figures of 3-32.

Jofra Archer (2-34) returned for his 50th T20 cap after being rested for the first T20 of the series, with fellow-seamer Josh Tongue dropping out, and took two wickets in the final over with Dushmantha Chameera bowled middle stump for a duck and Tharindu Rathnayake caught by Brook.

"They were too good. We have to improve a lot, honestly, because we are not up to the mark right now," said Sri Lanka captain Charith Asalanka.

The final T20 of the three-match series is at Manchester's Old Trafford today.

BRIEF SCORES

England 146 for 4 (Banton 52*, Buttler 30)
beat Sri Lanka 145 for 9 (Nassanka 37, Asalanka 31, Dawson 3-32) **by six wickets**

SPOTLIGHT

Japan cricketers hail 'amazing' experience playing India at Asiad

AFP
Nagoya, Japan

Japan's women cricketers said they had an "amazing" experience at the Asian Games yesterday, despite the hosts being crushed by powerhouse India in the quarter-finals.

India, ranked behind only Australia and England, bowled out Japan for 57 off 19.5 overs in the Twenty20 contest.

Led by opener experienced Shafali Verma's unbeaten 40 off 15 balls, India romped to an eight-wicket victory by reaching 59-2 off just five overs.

Japan have appeared in two previous Asian Games and are benefiting from a push to promote cricket in the baseball-obsessed country, where it is a minority sport.

"This opportunity was amazing, especially for me," said Japan's Ahilya Chandel.

"Being half-Indian, it was extra special. Watching the team on TV

and now being able to face them in real life has been great.

"From this game we can learn a lot about what we can work on in the future, if we get to face them again or play higher-ranked teams."

A good-size crowd of home supporters turned out to watch Japan at the Korogi Athletic Park in Nagoya.

"Playing at home was really good and special," said Chandel.

"Friends and family came, along with supporters and our sponsors.

"There were probably fans who didn't know cricket but came to watch because it was a new sport for them.

"That's what we want as a women's cricket team, to attract Japanese people who don't know cricket."

Defending Asian Games champions India will play Bangladesh in tomorrow's semi-finals and Pakistan face Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka beat Malaysia by 86 runs in the day's other quarter-final.

FOCUS

Sooryavanshi has to be patient, says India coach Gambhir

AFP
New Delhi

India coach Gautam Gambhir said Vaibhav Sooryavanshi will have to wait for his chance to break into the side after he left the 15-year-old prodigy on the sidelines of their three-match Twenty20 series sweep against Afghanistan.

Abhishek Sharma and Sanju Samson opened for India in the series, with Abhishek scoring the third-fastest century in T20 internationals in Thursday's 127-run victory in New Delhi.

Sooryavanshi, who was the highest scorer in this year's Indian Premier League, made his international debut against England in July but the top-order batter failed to make an impact as the hosts dominated India in the T20 series.

He scored two fifties against Zimbabwe in Harare later that month but has not played for India since.

"Whether you're a 15-year-old or a 30-year-old, when you have to wait for your opportunity you have to wait for your opportunity," Gambhir told reporters after the match.

"We know the kind of talent he has and what he can do, but someone who has been performing for the last two to three years will always be ahead of someone who has just entered the team."

Sooryavanshi will travel to Nagoya for India's Asian Games campaign, with a one-off T20 against hosts Japan set for Tuesday before the Asiad quarter-final on September 28.

"Whenever he gets his run, he will get a longer run as well ... we want competition and talent in the



Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, who was the highest scorer in this year's Indian Premier League, made his international debut against England in July.

dressroom," Gambhir added.

Meanwhile Indian captain Shreyas Iyer was pleased with his team scored above 220 against Afghanistan in the third T20 international that his side won by 127 runs on Thursday.

"Just to cream those runs, to get 220 on the board was unbelievable. Commendable performance from Afghanistan as well. Honestly speaking, I knew we were going to bat today. I had a brief conversation with Ibrahim and he wanted to bowl as well. I had this vision we were going to bat," Iyer said.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Mbappe ends Nike contract, signs with On



Reuters
Paris

French soccer star **Kylian Mbappe** has ended a two-decade relationship with Nike to join fast-growing Swiss sportswear brand On, giving the Roger Federer-backed company a marquee name for its push into football and handing the US giant another high-profile defection to a rising rival.

The financial terms of the deal have not been disclosed, though On said that the structure includes both cash and equity components, without providing further details.

The move underlines On's ambitions to expand beyond running and tennis into football, where it

plans to launch its first boots in 2027 and has brought in former France star Thierry Henry as director of football.

It adds to pressure on Nike, which has recently lost other high-profile players to rivals as newer brands make inroads into the global sportswear market.

Mbappe's move to On ends a relationship between the French national team captain and Nike that dates back to 2006 when he was 9 years old, and comes on the heels of Nike's loss of recent World Cup winner Spain's Lamine Yamal to Adidas.

'WE WISH HIM CONTINUED SUCCESS'

"We are proud of what we achieved together on and off the pitch. As

he moves into the next phase of his career, we wish him continued success for what comes next," Nike said in a statement.

His exit comes despite Nike's foothold in France, where the company has secured an extension to the French national team's long-running kit-supply agreement until 2033-34.

On's US-listed shares briefly gained as much as 5% in premarket trading before turning flat, while Nike shares were little changed, indicating the news had limited impact on investors.

On is looking for growth in north and south Americas, which account for more than half of its revenue.

The company has focused on full-price sales, but has struggled

in the region this year amid choppy economic spending.

NIKE HAD INCREASINGLY LEANED ON MBAPPE

Nike had increasingly leaned on Mbappe as one of the sport's leading global ambassadors, as soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo enters the latter stage of his career.

The 2018 World Cup winner was a centerpiece of Nike's football marketing at this year's FIFA World Cup, most recently receiving signature editions of its Mercurial boots.

"Once again it (football) has led me to one of the biggest changes in my life. Now, I find myself surrounded by innovators who dream of the same things I do," Mbappe said on his social media accounts.

PREVIEW

United misery puts Carrick under pressure

'It's all about what you do next and dealing with the moments'

AFP
London

Michael Carrick needs a win at Fulham to ease the mounting pressure on troubled Manchester United while Tottenham are desperate for their first Premier League goal of the season against fellow strugglers Aston Villa.

At the top end of the table, Arsenal and Manchester City aim to maintain their perfect records going into the international break.

As Carrick trudged towards the tunnel at Old Trafford after Manchester United's demoralising collapse against Brighton, the rumble of discontent grew louder with each footstep.

United had just lost a home game after holding a two-goal lead for the first time in 50 years and fans at the Stretford End were venting their frustration, with jeers and abuse aimed at Carrick and his players.

The United manager acknowledged Wednesday's 3-2 loss to Brighton in the League Cup third round was unacceptable as he took responsibility for their third defeat in six games this season.

But Carrick's willingness to shoulder the blame will not save him from even greater scrutiny and criticism if United lose at Fulham tomorrow.

United have won just once in four league games and have lost their past two matches in all competitions.

They cannot afford another setback against a Fulham side languishing in the relegation zone and who are yet to win in the league this season.

"Of course we can turn it around. We've got some really good players and it feels bad at the moment because we haven't had a great week, or two or three weeks," Carrick said.

"It's all about what you do next and dealing with the moments, and the ups and downs."



Manchester United manager Michael Carrick with Benjamin Sesko during the League Cup match against Brighton & Hove Albion at Old Trafford in Manchester on Wednesday. (Reuters)

MARMOUSH WANTS SPURS TO STICK TOGETHER

Without a win or even a goal in the league this season, Roberto De Zerbi's expensively rebuilt Tottenham are back in familiar territory.

Spurs have finished one place above the relegation zone in each of the past two seasons - narrowly avoiding the dreaded drop on the final day of the 2025/26 campaign.

De Zerbi spent more than £300mn (\$400mn) in the close season in a bid to ensure the north Londoners would be more competitive.

Instead, they are once again marooned in 17th place, on just two points, ahead of Aston Villa's visit today.

Beaten 3-1 at Liverpool in the League Cup third round in mid-week, Tottenham have already shown the anxious, error-strewn form that condemned them to a relegation battle last season.

Losing to Villa - who have made

an even worse start, with only one point from four games - would leave Spurs with a sinking feeling again. Trying to remain positive, Tottenham forward Omar Marmoush said: "These moments build the mentality and the team together. We are all one big family and we push together."

ARSENAL, MAN CITY SET THE STANDARD

Arsenal have made a perfect start to their bid for the club's first back-to-back titles since the 1930s, with Manchester City emerging as their main rivals after their own flawless run.

Arsenal sit top of the table with four successive wins and City are just behind them on goal difference.

It is little surprise to see the Gunners in pole position given their dominant march to the title last season.

But City's early success is more eye-opening in the first campaign of the post-Pep Guardiola era.

Guardiola's successor Enzo Maresca bolstered his approval rating among City fans by masterminding a 1-0 win at Manchester United last weekend, decided by a goal that should have been ruled out for offside.

"For sure the fans are happy and that's the only thing I care about," Maresca said.

Arsenal, who travel to Brighton today and City, who host Sunderland tomorrow, will expect to maintain their blistering form heading into the international break.

Fixtures (all times GMT):
Today (1400 unless stated)
Tottenham v Aston Villa (1130), Brighton v Arsenal, Everton v Ipswich, Newcastle v Hull, Nottingham Forest v Coventry (1630)
Tomorrow (1300 unless stated)
Bournemouth v Liverpool, Leeds v Crystal Palace, Manchester City v Sunderland, Fulham v Manchester United (1530)

FOOTBALL

UEFA and CONCACAF urge FIFA president to make \$2.1bn payout

AFP
Paris, France

Two continental football federations, UEFA and CONCACAF, yesterday called on FIFA President Gianni Infantino to release around \$2.1bn from the global governing body's reserves to share among its 211 member associations.

A letter sent to Infantino by European football chief Aleksander Ceferin and his counterpart at the North and Central American and Caribbean body, Victor Montagliani, said each of FIFA's member associations (MAS) should receive \$10 million in the four years between 2027-2030.

The move is the latest twist in the civil war which erupted in world football after it emerged Infantino sought to sell a stake in the World Cup to private investors.

The incendiary proposal was short-lived after a fierce backlash across the sport, with European governing body UEFA threatening to boycott all FIFA competitions until the plan was shelved.

Infantino has said the venture was designed to raise capital for football across the world.

But Ceferin and Montagliani's letter, sent yesterday and obtained by AFP, said FIFA's vast cash reserves - estimated at around \$6bn - could be used to boost funding for the sport without outside investment.

"FIFA already has the capacity to deliver substantially more to its MAS from its own balance sheet - without any sale of interests in its competitions, and without asking anything of the MAS in return," the letter read.

"Our analysis indicates that



European football chief Aleksander Ceferin

FIFA should make at least \$10 million available to each of its 211 MAS over the 2027-30 cycle for investment in infrastructure and football development - an aggregate of approximately USD 2.1 billion," it added.

The letter said the "one-off" release of funds would be in addition to the annual development funding already distributed to FIFA members, which under Infantino has increased to \$8mn per country over a four-year cycle.

The UEFA and CONCACAF letter said they would issue recommendations for disbursements at the next FIFA Council meeting.

The letter comes a day after England's Football Association chair Debbie Hewitt wrote to Infantino requesting a full disclosure of information relating to the ill-fated private equity plan.

Hewitt has also called for the release of documents relating to the decision to suspend a ban handed to United States striker Folarin Balogun during the World Cup, which followed a phone call from US President Donald Trump to Infantino.

RYBAKINA PULLS OUT OF BJK CUP FINALS

Newly crowned world number one Elena Rybakina will miss the Billie Jean King Cup Finals for Kazakhstan, the US Open champion said yesterday, citing a physically demanding month.

The 27-year-old produced a dominant performance to dethrone two-time defending champion Aryna Sabalenka in last weekend's US Open final, securing a third Grand Slam title to go with her rise to the top of the rankings.

An ankle injury had threatened to derail Rybakina's campaign before the tournament began, but she overcame those concerns to add the US Open crown to her Australian Open title this year and

her 2022 Wimbledon triumph.

"I have to announce that I won't be able to participate in Billie Jean King Cup this year," Rybakina said.

"Am very sad to miss Shenzhen, such a nice place with an amazing crowd."

"Last month has been tough for my body and I will need to recover and be at my best to compete again. I wish girls good luck."

The Billie Jean King Cup Finals will be held in Shenzhen, China, from September 22 to 27, with Kazakhstan set to face Spain in the quarter-finals on September 23. Italy are the two-time defending champions.

FOCUS

Jacquet among new faces as coach Zidane names his first France squad

AFP
Paris

New France coach Zinedine Zidane unveiled his highly anticipated first squad yesterday for the upcoming Nations League fixtures, naming several new faces including Liverpool centre back Jeremy Jacquet, who has impressed in his debut season at Anfield.

The 54-year-old Zidane, whose brilliance helped France to win their first World Cup on home soil in 1998, returns to the national team tasked with turning recent near-misses into trophies.

Zidane enjoyed a glittering managerial career at former club Real Madrid, leading the Spanish side to three successive Champions League titles. Similar success will be expected with France,

who boast some of football's most gifted players, as they build up to the 2028 European Championship and the 2030 World Cup.

France won the 2018 World Cup, finished runners-up to Argentina in 2022 and reached the semi-finals of this year's showpiece tournament.

Goalkeeper Guillaume Restes, defenders Jacquet and Andy Diouf, midfielder Lucas Da Cunha and forward Esteban Lepaul were among the players given their first senior call-ups by Zidane.

Real Madrid midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni was among the notable absentees.

Zidane was appointed as France coach until the 2030 World Cup in July, succeeding Didier Deschamps and becoming the third member of France's 1998 World Cup-winning team to lead Les Bleus.

He will take charge for the first time in the Nations League group stage against Turkey in Izmit on September 25. France then travel to Belgium

before hosting Italy and Belgium in October.

FRANCE SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Mike Maignan (AC Milan), Guillaume Restes (Toulouse), Robin Riser (Lens)
Defenders: Andy Diouf (Inter Milan), Jeremy Jacquet (Liverpool), Pierre Kalulu (Juventus), Ibrahim Konate (Real Madrid), Jules Kounde (Barcelona), Maxence Lacroix (Chelsea), Adrien Truffert (Bournemouth), Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)
Midfielders: Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid), Rayan Cherki (Manchester City), Lucas Da Cunha (Como), Manu Kone (AS Roma), Adrien Rabiot (AC Milan), Warren Zaire-Emery (PSG)
Forwards: Bradley Barcola (Liverpool), Ousmane Dembele (PSG), Desire Doue (Paris St Germain), Esteban Lepaul (Rennes), Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid), Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)



Coach Zinedine Zidane during the press conference at the French Football Federation headquarters in Paris yesterday. (Reuters)

SQUASH

Asal and Orfi crowned Qatar Classic champions

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mostafa Asal produced a dominant performance to win his first Qatar Classic title, while 19-year-old Amina Orfi created history by becoming the youngest women's World No.1 after a dramatic victory over Hania El Hammamy in Doha yesterday.

Top seed Asal was at his imperious best in the men's final, defeating fifth seed Victor Crouin 11-5, 11-6, 11-2 in just 36 minutes to claim the first major title of the PSA Squash Tour season.

The Egyptian, the reigning world champion, controlled the contest from the opening exchanges and gave Crouin little opportunity to settle into the match. Asal used his power, variety and disguise to move the Frenchman around the court, taking a firm grip of the first game before producing seven successive points in the second after Crouin had opened with a 5-1 lead.

Crouin never recovered as Asal

moved within one game of the title. The World No.1 then raced into a 7-2 lead in the third and closed out the match without further trouble. "It's amazing to win this title. It was the only one I was struggling with. As they say, third-time lucky," Asal said. "I'm proud of myself; it's been a tough week. It's the first one of the season, and I just want to thank everyone who helped me get here today."

Crouin, who had enjoyed an impressive run to the final, was unable to reproduce the form that had taken him past Karim Gawad in the semi-finals.

Earlier, Orfi produced one of the most dramatic finals in Qatar Classic history, saving two championship balls before beating defending champion El Hammamy 11-7, 7-11, 8-11, 11-7, 12-10 in a 107-minute thriller.

The match appeared to be slipping away from El Hammamy after she rolled her right ankle while chasing a shot in the third game. She required treatment and returned to the court visibly struggling with her movement. Orfi took advantage to move within one

game of the title, but El Hammamy showed remarkable resilience to level the match and force a deciding fifth game.

The decider went point for point before Orfi earned two championship balls at 10-8. El Hammamy saved both, but the teenager held her nerve to finally close out the contest 12-10.

The victory secured Orfi's second major achievement of the year after she became world champion and also made her the youngest player to reach the top of the women's world rankings.

"It's amazing. To be able to become World Champion and World No.1 in the same year, it's amazing," Orfi said. "It's been a dream since I was young. I'm really happy right now."

Orfi said she drew on lessons from previous defeats by El Hammamy and Nour El Sherbini to stay composed during the decisive stages. "I've learned from past matches against Hania and Nour ElSherbini, just to keep my cool at the end and go for it, because if I don't go for it, she will! It worked in the end today."



Egypt's Mostafa Asal (left) and Amina Orfi pose with their Qatar Classic trophies.

SPOTLIGHT

Athletes 'can't take it any more' as Asian Games issues mount

Teams have also criticised the quality of the accommodation, including beds

AFP
Nagoya, Japan

The Asian Games in Japan were facing more accusations of poor organisation with a world champion gymnast "totally exhausted", the public drafted in to rescue stranded athletes and South Korea lodging a complaint about a Japanese warlord.

The continent's premier sporting spectacle opens in Nagoya and Aichi prefecture today, but the build-up has been soured by several issues.

That includes a shortage of rooms for the more than 17,000 athletes and officials – a bigger number than the Olympics. Some teams have also criticised the quality of the accommodation, including beds that are too short. To save money there is no athletes' village, organisers instead putting competitors in hotels, temporary cabins and on a cruise ship. Organisers say the accommodation is safe, cost-effective and comfortable.

Chinese gymnast Zhang Boheng, who won two silver medals at the Paris Olympics and has two world championship titles to his name, said he and some of his teammates were left waiting for six hours after landing on Wednesday.

"I'm totally exhausted," he said in a video published on Thursday and shared widely on Chinese social media. "I didn't expect that after breakfast at 7am the next time I could eat would be close to 7pm," the 26-year-old said.

He said the wait was caused by registration and paperwork, before heading to the cruise ship where 4,000 Games participants will be housed in Nagoya's port area. But when they arrived at the ship, he said heavy rain prevented them from boarding.

"A whole day was basically wasted like



To save money there is no athletes' village at Asian Games in Japan, with organisers instead putting competitors in hotels, temporary cabins and on a cruise ship. Organisers say the accommodation is safe, cost-effective and comfortable. (Reuters)

this," added Zhang. "In the end we really couldn't take it any more so we decided to book rooms at a hotel to rest."

The video has since been taken down but Chinese state media said that other Chinese athletes also faced travel delays upon arrival. Beijing's consulate in Nagoya contacted Chinese citizens in the area to give the badminton team lifts after issues with a shuttle bus and a shortage of public transport tickets, Xinhua reported.

Chinese social media users applauded athletes, including table tennis star Sun Yingsha, for stretching and exercising at the airport. The hashtag "Asian Games absurd" has since been viewed more than 94mn times on Weibo.

India's team had similar delays at the airport. "There was an issue in getting accreditation for athletes at the airport dur-

ing immigration. There were long queues with a lot of other nations there," India's chef de mission and Indian Olympic Association (IOA) treasurer Sahdev Yadav said. "But these things happen and we have got everything sorted."

South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that some of the country's athletes waited at the airport for more than five hours on Thursday. "We are aware of the situation including reports that athletes have had to wait for hours and we are doing our best to handle it," a Korean Sport and Olympic Committee (KSOC) official said.

Also on Friday, the KSOC said it had filed a complaint with Games organisers for featuring a Japanese warlord at a welcoming ceremony. The event on Tuesday included a person dressed as Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who led Japan's invasions of Korea in 1592-1598,

and the ceremony prompted a backlash in South Korea.

Historical issues are sensitive between South Korea and Japan, with Hideyoshi's invasion a significant episode in Korean history and Korea under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945.

Despite the mounting issues Asia's Olympic chief hinted that future editions of the multisport event could be even bigger. "I am a supporter to increase the number of athletes, not to decrease athletes," said Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) director general Husain al-Musallam.

He conceded that he wished there was an athletes' village – like in previous editions – but added: "We need to listen also to the organiser, to the host, how they would look for the future, after the Games, after the closing ceremony."

Bungling Asian Games chiefs play North Korean anthem for South

Nagoya, Japan: Asian Games organisers played the North Korean national anthem for the South Korean men's hockey team, later apologising for the blunder. South Korean officials were left angered by the latest mishap to hit the Games ahead of Saturday's opening ceremony in Nagoya. South Korea thrashed Bangladesh 5-0 but beforehand, instead of their national anthem, the song belonging to North Korea rang out.

The players from South Korea, who had lined up to listen to their anthem, looked at each other bemused. Organisers then played Bangladesh's anthem, before playing the South Korean anthem later, the South's Yonhap news agency said.

However, the referee ordered players on both sides to shake hands with each other and to start getting ready to play before the anthem ended, it reported.

A stadium announcer apologised for the blunder but Min Tae-seok, coach of South Korea, was deeply unimpressed. "This is a really serious problem. When we protested, they said, 'We're sorry. It wasn't that it wasn't prepared, there was a mistake on the part of those responsible for playing it,'" he said. "But this is something that simply should never happen."

The build-up to the Games has been overshadowed by complaints from teams about the quality and amount of accommodation. Some teams were also stranded at the airport for up to six hours when they landed this week.

Five years after the Tokyo Olympics unfolded to empty stadiums, the Asian Games offer Japan another chance to throw open the gates to fans and enjoy a major multi-sport event with a proper atmosphere. But a day before opening ceremony in Nagoya, the mood was decidedly low-key among some locals.

The Games have already kicked off with soccer and basketball preliminaries, thousands of athletes have filed into Nagoya, and there is no shortage of signage promoting the event.

FOCUS

Athletes' Village would have been a white elephant, says OCA

Reuters
Nagoya

Asian Games organisers could have avoided accommodation issues by building an Athletes' Village but doing so would have left them with a white elephant after the curtain comes down on the multi-sport event, the Olympic Council of Asia said.

The initial plan for an Athletes' Village at the Aichi-Nagoya Games was scrapped to control costs and organisers have had to get creative, housing 17,000 athletes and officials in hotels, shipping-container style tents and a cruise ship.

However, there have been complaints about cramped conditions and undersized beds, and organisers faced further scrutiny when Team Japan said they were seeking alternative arrangements after some male and female athletes were assigned to



A play equipment featuring Asian Games mascot Honohon is installed at a fan zone.

shared rooms.

"It's very easy, you can insist on an Athletes' Village," OCA Director General Husain al-Musallam told reporters. "You build the Athletes' Village, you spend such amount of money, and then we need to see what's going to happen after the Games'

closing ceremony and what's the utilisation of the Athletes' Village. (Considering) the cost and size of the Games, we need to be a little bit flexible. Yes, the Athletes' Village is good to look at. But at the end of the day, we need to be practical."

While the next two Asian Games in Doha

and Riyadh will feature Athletes' Villages, Tayyab Ikram, head of the OCA Coordination Commission for Aichi-Nagoya, said it is not a mandatory element of any Games.

"We had clear statistics about what is happening in the real estate values. We don't want to leave a white elephant after the Games here," said Ikram. "It was not easy discussions, but it was also not a compromise because we found a very unique kind of alternatives," he said of the accommodation options.

Local organisers have said the strain on accommodation arose because they were expecting 15,000 athletes and officials for the Games, only for numbers to increase as new sports were added.

"(The choice was) either we sacrifice the athletes, or we pay high costs. So we choose not to sacrifice the athletes," said al-Musallam, who also serves as president of World Aquatics. "We want every athlete to have the possibility and chance to com-

pete. Now, with the current political crisis and conflicts in Asia and around the world, we need sport at this moment more than anything else."

Organisers also said that they had plans in place to cope with any emergencies with a typhoon potentially threatening the Aichi-Nagoya coast on Monday. "Under normal rainy conditions, the Games will carry on as usual," Nagoya Mayor Ichiro Hirotsawa, who also serves as deputy president of the Games, told Reuters.

"However, in the event of torrential rain that triggers emergency alerts, we will arrange for the athletes to evacuate temporarily. Additionally, if we encounter typhoon-level strong winds, the cruise ship will move offshore. We already have clear protocols in place for situations like these."

After the COVID-19 pandemic deprived the Tokyo Olympics of spectators five years ago, Hirotsawa said pent-up public demand will result in packed venues.