

Sunday, November 20, 2022
Rabia II 26, 1444 AH

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TIMES

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FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar 2022









Qatar's players take part in a training session at the Aspire Academy pitch in Doha yesterday, on the eve of the FIFA World Cup opening match against Ecuador. (AFP)

It's a very important day for us, it's a historic moment, says Qatar coach Sanchez

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

When the Qatar players and long-serving coach Felix Sanchez step on to the Al Bayt Stadium pitch for their World Cup opener against Ecuador tonight, there will be a few tears of joy streaming down their faces.

The players, Sanchez and their families have all dreamt of the night of November 20, 2022 - when the small nation with mighty ambitions takes the spotlight on the global stage.

Qatar has been subjected to a deluge of criticism since it won the rights to host the football's showpiece event in 2010, but the players have stayed away from the unwanted distraction - keeping their eyes firmly on the ball. In the past decade Qatar football has taken a giant leap, with their emphatic maiden Asian Cup title in 2019 showing they are on the right track.

Tonight, years of planning will reach a full circle when they take on Ecuador - the South Americans with a ranking of 44, just six places above Qatar.

But as Sanchez rightly admitted yesterday, Ecuador will start as favourites at least on paper with Gustavo Alfaro's men possessing a trio of players with Premier League experience. Their physicality too will put Qatar's home-grown players under stern test.

But more than anything, Qatar team's fortunes on the night will depend on how they tackle the expectations of the 60,000-capacity Al Bayt Stadium filled with celebrities, former stars and their loved ones and the billions watching via live broadcast. Months and days ahead of the biggest match of their lives,



Qatar's Spanish coach Felix Sanchez (left) and captain Hassan al-Haydos attend a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Centre (QNCC) in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

Al Annabi players have spoken about the childhood dream of playing at the World Cup. In a matter of hours, that will come true.

"It's a very important day for us, it's a historic moment," said Sanchez yesterday, flanked by captain Hassan al-Haydos, under the glare of huge international media. "It's a very happy day for us, for the players and the staff. It's an extraordinary day... We have made a huge investment in this country. I hope we can enjoy football, our sport, and do our talking on the pitch. I hope all the countries in the world can come together to enjoy this," the Spaniard added.

Sanchez, a former Barcelona youth coach, arrived in Qatar in 2006 and has since seen the rapid rise of the country. The 46-year-old too has risen from the ranks - from managing Aspire Academy teams to becoming the senior team coach in 2017. Just like his players, Sanchez too

has dared to dream.

"After so many years, this is the end of a cycle - 16 years working in this country. I've been in a project, growing and following the steps of players in the national team. It's a huge source of pride. I will try to enjoy the moment," he said.

Ecuador could most likely be their least difficult opponent in Group A. The Maroon also face African champions Senegal, who even without Bayern Munich star Sadio Mane are lethal and then there is three-time World Cup runners-up the Netherlands, who have come to Qatar determined to prove a point under Louis van Gaal.

"We know it's three (group) games, we know the potential of our opponents. They are national teams that, due to their history and individual talent, they're ahead of us. On paper they should get the three points, maybe they count on winning all three points. But we're here to

show that we can be a competitive team. We will bring our A game," Sanchez candidly admitted.

The Qatar coach, however, would have been pleased if the World Cup had arrived at least two winters ago. After the Asian Cup high in 2019, there has been a visible dip in performances of key players.

The squad has been richer by the experience of playing in the 2019 Copa America, 2021 Concacaf Gold Cup - where they reached the semi-finals - and the European qualifiers earlier this year. But there is concern that Qatar has passed their peak.

With an eye on the World Cup, the players - mainly consisting of domestic heavyweights Al Sadd and Al Duhail - were pulled out of the Qatar Stars League and trained in Europe since June. But the performances have failed to inspire much as the team now boast a worst defensive record

among the 32 teams at the World Cup by a good margin.

"Obviously everything we've done in the past three years is to have a very competitive team in the World Cup. Every country's situation is different and we're a small country. All our players play in the local league, so we decided one of the ways to strengthen the national team was to... make massive sacrifices and spend long periods abroad. This shows the commitment of our players. All the time spent abroad training and competing is for tomorrow, so we can start the competition well," Sanchez said.

Sanchez has injected some fresh blood into the squad, but will be hoping that 15 players from the Asian Cup squad will play a key role in avoiding the fate of South Africa, who remain the only host country in 2010 to be eliminated in the group stage.

The attacking pair of Almoez Ali and Akram Afif will have to play a crucial role for Qatar, who like to sit back and counter attack. Ecuador barely eked out a positive goal differential in South American qualifying - undoubtedly the toughest continent to qualify from.

Ecuador boast some more recognisable names than the Qataris, including Brighton midfielder Moises Caicedo and veteran striker Enner Valencia but have struggled to find the net of late.

Ecuador coach Alfaro said Qatar will prove a tough opponents tonight, suggesting the hosts are better prepared having played together for several months.

"Qatar is Qatar and they have been preparing for this match for over 12 years," said Alfaro. "They've been preparing for five, six months playing friendlies that means they are a very good organised and well prepared team," the Argentine added.

Qatar vs Ecuador FACTBOX



When: Today, 7pm
Where: Al Bayt Stadium
Capacity: 60,000



Key stats and facts

- World Cup hosts have never lost their opening game.
- Qatar automatically qualified as hosts but the Gulf country also proved their worth by winning the Asian Cup in 2019.
- Striker Almoez Ali was Qatar's top scorer at the Asian Cup with nine goals but he has scored only once in 2022.
- This is Ecuador's fourth World Cup but they have qualified for the knockout stages only once in 2006, where they were eliminated in the last-16.
- Ecuador's top scorer in the CONMEBOL South American World Cup qualifiers was Michael Estrada (six goals).
- Ecuador did not pick Byron Castillo for the World Cup after the country's football federation decided not to include him following Chile's claim at the Court of Arbitration for Sport that he was ineligible to play in qualifying matches.

Previous meetings

- Qatar and Ecuador have played each other three times, with both teams winning once and one game ending in a draw.
- The last time they played each other was in October 2018 when Qatar beat Ecuador 4-3 in a friendly in Doha.



Ecuador's coach Gustavo Alfaro (second right) talks with midfielder Moises Caicedo during a training session at the Mesaimeer Sports Club yesterday. (AFP)



Spotlight

Wales World Cup return left family in tears, says Rodon

AFP
Rennes, France

Wales centre-back Joe Rodon is far too young to remember the one and only time his country played at a World Cup, 64 years ago.

The 25-year-old defender, on loan at Rennes from Tottenham, is set to start tomorrow as Wales appear in the tournament for the first time since 1958 when they face the United States in Doha.

Rob Page's side reached the finals with a play-off victory over Ukraine in Cardiff in June.

"I think the emotions that were shown that day in Cardiff, especially at home with all the fans, hit every player," Rodon said.

"It was such a long journey. My parents and all my family were crying after the game so I could see how much it meant to them."

Up until Euro 2016, when they went on to reach the semi-finals, Wales repeatedly tried and failed to replicate the feat achieved by the 1958 side, featuring John Charles and Cliff Jones, of reaching a major tournament.

Defender Paul Bodin missed a penalty in a 1994 qualifier against Romania when victory would have sent Wales to the USA, while the 2003 vintage including Ryan Giggs slipped to a European Championship play-off loss to Russia.

But, six years ago, the anguish turned to joy at Euro 2016 in France, as Gareth Bale and Aaron Ramsey helped the country of three million people all the way to the last four.

Rodon has played alongside Bale for Wales since 2019 and spent a season with the five-time Champions League winner



Wales centre-back Joe Rodon is far too young to remember the one and only time his country played at a World Cup.

when the former Real Madrid star was on loan at Tottenham.

"Everyone knows what he is," Rodon said from a hospitality box at Rennes' Roazhon Park. "He's been one of the world's best for years and we're so delighted to have him as one of ours."

"Not just that, he's funny, he jokes, he kind of takes that pressure off the team."

"He's a close friend of mine as well. It's a pleasure to have him. Hopefully we can keep him for a few years."

'WELSH MAFIA'

Rodon, who came through Swansea's academy, has enjoyed a fine start to life at Rennes, with the club sitting third in Ligue 1 after an 11-match unbeaten run in the French top flight.

Alongside Bale, Wales de-

fender Ben Davies and "honorary Welshman" Son Heung-min, Rodon created a light-hearted "Welsh mafia" at Spurs with their input on the club's social media channels.

"Ben's one of my best friends in football as well," Rodon said. "I miss them but it was brilliant to have those two there when I was there. It helped me settle in fast and Sonny as well."

"It was a brilliant experience, and one that I'll always remember. We'll see what the future holds."

Rodon has become a mainstay under Page and was an important player in Wales' journey to the last 16 of Euro 2020, where they played two group games in searing heat in Azerbaijan.

Wales have pushed back their training sessions in Qatar to avoid the hottest parts of the

day. "The environment is going to be challenging for us as we're used to the cold," Rodon said.

"At the end of the day, it's a game of football, that's all we can concentrate and focus on and we'll take each game as it comes."

Four days after taking on the Americans, Wales face Iran before ending their Group B campaign against closest rivals England. "I don't want to think about that (England game) yet," Rodon said.

"Everyone knows they're our neighbours, we're next door to each other but I don't want to talk about us or them, about the game. I just want to focus on the first one."

"For us boys it's what we want to be doing and what we want to do for the country. We want to be part of these elite tournaments."

Qatar beach volleyball team crowned Asian champions



Qatar men's beach volleyball team comprising the duo of Sherif Younis and Ahmed Tejan, the No 3 world ranking team, was crowned winners in the Asian Senior Men's Beach Volleyball Championship which took place at Bandar Abbas City in Iran, QNA reported from Tehran. They won against Australian duo Christopher McHugh and Paul Burnett by two clean runs (21-16, 21/17) on Friday. Earlier, Qatar qualified for the final after winning against the Chinese team of Li Zhuoxin and Xue Tao with two free runs in the semi-final.

Focus

Bale sets the tone for tight-knit Wales: Williams

AFP
Doha

Wales midfielder Jonny Williams says captain Gareth Bale's "down-to-earth" personality is a unifying force within the squad as the country prepares for its first World Cup appearance since 1958.

Williams, who now plays for Swindon in England's fourth tier, was part of the Wales squad that reached the semi-finals at Euro 2016 after ending a 58-year absence from major tournaments.

The Welsh also made the last 16 at Euro 2020 and will again look to the likes of Bale and Aaron Ramsey to lead from the front as they take on the USA, Iran and rivals England in Group B.

"We have a massive togetherness in the squad. I think it starts from the manager but also having a captain in Gareth and a leader who's so down to earth," said Williams.

"He treats everyone the same, he sets the stall out a bit. Any young player coming into the squad sees Gareth's got no ego, he has a laugh... and eve-



Wales' Gareth Bale and Jonny Williams during training.

ryone should be like that. "I think that's why the squad's so strong."

Wales came through the play-offs with a 1-0 victory over Ukraine to reach the finals.

Williams put no limits on how far Wales can go at their first World Cup since a team inspired by John Charles advanced to the quarter-finals in 1958 before losing to Pele's Brazil. "It's very surreal being at a World Cup, to see the Wales flag surrounded by some top nations like Brazil and Argentina," said Williams.

"It's got a bit of a different feel to the past Euros. It's the world stage, the World Cup, it's the pinnacle."

Bale and Ramsey were among five Wales players missing from Saturday's training session in Doha, having been placed on individual programmes to manage their workloads.

"When we have a full strength squad we can compete against anyone," added Williams.

"I think we showed that again in the Nations League. We got relegated but I think we showed we can compete with some top, top nations."

Opinion

'Publishers must embrace the Mideast and collaboration is key for eSports to flourish'

Integration, collaboration, and connectivity across multiple stakeholders in the eSports ecosystem are vital for the sector to reach its undoubted potential in the Middle East, according to senior officials from QUEST Esports, one of the leading eSports organisations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Latest data forecasts the value of gaming in the Mena region to reach US\$5bn by 2025.

Still, QUEST Esports CEO Elie Honain insists more needs to be done for the eSports ecosystem to truly flourish, starting with publishers embracing the Middle East, alongside public-private sector collaboration.

"Publishers are the core of eSports; this is the struggle we have had over the past decade with the majority of them not having a presence here. Publishers need to consider relocating or opening up offices in the Middle East to spur regional competition growth, and so we're not always feeding into EU tournaments," said Honain, who was speaking at the inaugural Initiate Summit, part of the first Dubai eSports Festival at Expo City, Dubai.

"Federations also need to collaborate with publishers to help grow the regional scene. In addition, if we look at interconnectivity and how some countries do not even have access to fibre optic Internet, there isn't an even playing ground."

"If publishers show faith in the region by investing, this will have a knock-on effect on telecommunica-



tion and governments to push investment in infrastructure and connectivity," added Honain.

"We need to show potential partners and sponsors that there are opportunities here when getting involved in eSports - and governments can help. Saudi Arabia is a great example of how to promote the fact you are building an ecosystem. Because we have a presence there, we have received so many enquiries about how to get involved," added Honain.

Meanwhile, Elie Gemayel, Chief Strategy Officer at QUEST Esports, participated in a panel discussion looking at where and how fans engage with content and admitted the industry must up its game.

"We must look at which platforms are the most accepted and advanced here. In terms of supporting streamers with advanced data analytics and media tools, YouTube is the main avenue to reach the gaming audience and offers the best tool sets for streamers and content creators," he said.

Established in 2019, QUEST has quickly joined the elite eSports domain and positioned itself among the industry giants. It signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Qatar Esports Federation (QESF) to develop eSports in the country.

Last year, the Doha-headquartered company managed five major online tournaments across Mena and two major LAN tournaments in Doha for games such as Fortnite, CS: GO, PUBG Mobile, Dota 2, and FIFA.

Major blow for World Padel Tour as court dismisses WPT's request to stop Premier Padel circuit

In a further major legal blow for Setpoint Events SA, the owners of World Padel Tour (WPT), the Commercial Court No 15 of Madrid this week has dismissed the request brought by WPT to stop the new Premier Padel tour and prevent players from participating in this championship. Since the beginning of this year, WPT has waged an unprecedented legal war against the entire padel community - the professional players, the International Padel Federation and anyone connected to the new Premier Padel tour - seeking to prevent open competition and to maintain its decade-long monopoly over professional padel tours. This week's ruling in Madrid is just the latest unsuccessful and damaging result for WPT.

In May 2022, WPT brought a claim before the Commercial Court No 15 of Madrid against the International Padel Federation (FIP), the Professional Players Association (PPA), Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), and seven individual players on grounds of unfair competition. WPT sued the defendants for encouraging players to breach the exclusivity obligation in their contracts with WPT and participate in Premier Padel tournaments. WPT also requested an interim injunction aimed at stopping the Premier Padel circuit, which WPT claimed was inter alia infringing the players' obligations to participate exclusively in all WPT tournaments under their contracts with WPT. This week the Commercial Court No 15 of Madrid has completely dismissed such interim measures finding that there was no legal basis to do so and also noting that:

■ WPT's existing contracts give it an almost absolute control of the sport of padel - due to the combination of WPT's exclusivity, black-out periods and other legal measures - which makes competition impossible.

- Professional padel players have every right to seek opportunities and better conditions on other tours. The fact that Premier Padel has improved conditions for players is not - quite clearly - unlawful.
- WPT's existence as a tour should be reliant on open competition, not pressuring players to be bound by exclusivity.
- Premier Padel does not impose exclusivity or restrict WPT, with players regularly playing for both circuits; in fact, WPT has even increased its calendar since Premier Padel launched.
- WPT's new offer to players - with no blan-



ket exclusivity - demonstrates that such exclusivity is neither supporting competition, nor necessary to organise an international padel circuit.

■ WPT's offer to withdraw legal actions against players if they renewed with WPT proves - in of itself - that the players' participation in other tours is not harmful to WPT.

The findings of the Madrid court will also be of significant interest to the European Commission, which is separately considering a complaint in relation to the anti-competitive behaviour of WPT under European law and its exorbitant legal claims against players and others involved in Premier Padel.

In addition, the separate arbitration brought by WPT against the players, seeking €25mn in damages, has been suspended, while Setpoint also lost an interim hearing in that case, with the Court

blocking Setpoint's attempt to group its claims against the players and requiring 70+ separate cases instead, in another blow to the immediate legal recourse WPT has been seeking. Alejandro Villaverde, General Secretary of the Professional Players Association, said: "The professional players have truly faced unfair legal attacks over the past year. This week's legal decision in Madrid shows that the rule of law always prevails - the PPA will repel every attack and stand firm in defending the players' rights to open competition, freedom of choice and basic professional decency."

Ziad Hammoud, member of the Board of Premier Padel, said: "Ultimately, it should come as no surprise that the request brought by one of the most anti-competitive tours in world sport - to stop another open tour - was completely dismissed. We have faced a year of the fiercest legal threats and media briefings by WPT, but the end result is always the same. WPT's actions are the antithesis of responsible sports administration and fly in the face of supporting the global development of a sport, player freedoms and player welfare."

Luigi Carraro, President of the International Padel Federation, said: "This past week has been definitive for anyone in doubt about the future of padel. The ITF lost its hostile vote to takeover padel, and WPT has emphatically lost its latest legal case seeking to enforce its monopoly according to news reports. The International Padel Federation will continue to work night and day to promote the sport of padel - both at professional and amateur level - across the world, while defending the right of the professional players to have the very best opportunities to play and pursue their amazing careers."

Five Qatar players to watch

Abdelkarim Hassan

Position: Left-back
Age: 29

'The Gunner' and 'the Flamethrower' are just two of the nicknames for Hassan - the third most-capped international player for Qatar with 130 games to his name. Hassan has been the first choice left-back for Al An-nabi for many a year and his influence is unparalleled.

The current Al Sadd star had a brief stint in Belgium several years ago and is expected to be one of the most influential players for Qatar at the World Cup. He is blessed with speed, gifted technical and dribbling ability, and a rocket of a shot, epitomised by his thundering goal against Yemen in the 2019 Gulf Cup.

Hassan's influence will be substantial given his wealth of international experience in major tournaments. It will come as no surprise if he is one of the standout performers for the hosts.

With Al Sadd's coach tweaking their formation last season to play three at the back as well as the emergence of the brilliant young Hammam al-Amin at left-back, some thought Hassan's demise was imminent. Quite the opposite. He has successfully adapted to the new position and offers Felix Sanchez a newfound versatility and flexibility at the back.

Saad al-Sheeb

Position: Goalkeeper
Age: 32

Saad al-Sheeb has long since dreamed of donning the No 1 shirt for Qatar at a home World Cup. In his interview with Al Jazeera back in 2019, he said: "At present, my only dream is to represent Qatar at the 2022 World Cup."

The Al Sadd goal-stopper has been a mainstay of Qatar's national team since his debut back in 2009. Al-Sheeb was vital in Al Sadd's back-to-back title triumphs in the Qatar Stars League over the past two seasons and on top of that, the player has earned 76 international caps. The keeper has also featured in major international tournaments such as the Asian Cup, Copa America, and the Concacaf Gold Cup.

Awarded the honour of Best Goalkeeper at the 2019 Asian Cup, he only conceded one goal throughout that tournament thanks to his quick reaction time and ability to snuff out counterattacks. He will no doubt play a pivotal role at Qatar 2022, and stern tests surely lie ahead, as he is tasked with nullifying the likes of Dutchmen Memphis Depay and Frankie de Jong. Al-Sheeb still has to earn his place in the starting line-up though, considering the brilliant displays by Meshaal Barsham at the 2021 Arab Cup.

Hassan al-Haydos

Position: Forward
Age: 31

Captain and playmaker al-Haydos, who can also drop into central midfield and on the right wing, was one of Qatar's star performers during their 2019 Asian Cup triumph. He will no doubt be one of the shining lights for Al Annabi at the World Cup due to his unquestionable technical ability. His personality on the pitch has shone consistently throughout his career. Whether it be his late winning goal against Japan in the 2008 Olympic qualifiers, or his famous penalty shootout heroics for his club Al Sadd against Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors in 2011, he has shown character in abundance. With 169 games under his belt, al-Haydos is the most capped Qatari international. It can be argued that he is among the most influential players in the team, having contributed to a total of 38 goals during his time with Al Annabi. Despite not having quite replicated his blistering goalscoring form at Al Sadd from 2018 and 2019, he has compensated with increased defensive output and now drops deeper to help out. This has been particularly evident in the last two seasons as Al Sadd have adopted a new system of three at the back. Al-Haydos was called up to the international scene some 14 years ago, making him the most experienced player in the squad. This experience will be priceless when faced with the formidable defences of Netherlands, Senegal and Ecuador.

Akram Afif

Position: Forward
Age: 26

Just like his father, Afif is a versatile player who plays on both the left and right wing, as well as sometimes even spearheading the attack. Afif also has wide-ranging experience playing in Europe after his stint with Belgium's OH Leuven, and several Spanish teams. He currently turns out for Al Sadd, where he has stamped his influence on the league. Despite a slight dip in form since April, he was still voted best player in the Qatar Stars League.

As well as his goalscoring prowess, he has both the technical ability and vision to create numerous chances. He has a long pass in his locker that can split defences and he often lifts balls into dangerous areas, not to mention make regular efforts on goal. All this attacking talent has Al Annabi fans dreaming of a strong World Cup campaign. Afif has also been shortlisted as AFC best player three times, winning the coveted award in 2019. Since then, he has been a vital cog for Qatar and is indispensable, even after his recent dip in form, and featured in all Qatar's latest friendlies.

Almoez Ali

Position: Striker
Age: 26


The current AI Duhail star was AI Annabi's top scorer in both the 2021 Gold Cup and the 2019 Asian Cup, registering nine goals and four goals respectively. He is the only player in the world who has scored in three different continental championships, and is currently Qatar's second highest all-time goal scorer, having registered 42 goals to date – close on the heels of all-time top scorer Mansour Mufthah, who has 44 goals to his name.


This winter, Qatari fans will be heavily relying on outstanding individual performances from him as well as his ability to cash in on half-chances to help their team's bid to qualify for the Round of 16.


Ali can convert an opportunity in the blink of an eye thanks to his quick feet and intelligence of movement inside the penalty area. All these skills were on show in the 2019 Asian Cup final, when he scored with a stunning scissor kick. In his last major international tournament, the Concacaf Gold Cup, where Qatar reached the semi-final, Ali took home the golden boot. Domestically, he proves his goalscoring worth at AI Duhail season after season. During the last campaign, Ali recorded his second-best goal tally relative to the number of matches played.

Underestimate this marksman at your peril.

Did you know?

 Qatar are hoping to become the first Asian team to win their first-ever match at the World Cup. Ten of the 11 Asian teams that have appeared in World Cup finals have lost their opening matches, while Kuwait drew with Czechoslovakia at Spain 1982.

 The goal that Qatar conceded against Japan in the Asian Cup 2019 final was the only time goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb was beaten at the tournament. At the opposite end, the Qataris scored 19 goals.

 Just ten shots were enough for Almoez Ali to win the top scorer award with nine goals at the Asian Cup 2019, the most ever scored by a player in a single edition of the tournament

Design: Jitendra Patel

Neymar ready to carry the weight of a nation on his shoulders

AFP
Rio de Janeiro

Fuelled by past disappointments at the World Cup, Neymar has been preparing for a long time to make sure he is in peak condition to lead Brazil into this year's tournament in Qatar. Now aged 30, the world's most expensive player has often struggled to live up to expectations and been hampered by injuries since joining Paris Saint-Germain from Barcelona in 2017 for a record 222mn euros.

It is not so long ago that Neymar let slip that Qatar could be his last World Cup as he struggled with the demands of playing football at the highest level. But his form and his attitude in the first three months of this season bode well going into Brazil's bid to win a record sixth World Cup crown.

After reporting for pre-season training a week earlier than expected, Neymar hit the ground running when the French campaign kicked off and he has scored 15 goals in 19 games so far for PSG, while also providing a hatful of assists for the likes of Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe. "He is flying. It is the fruit of all the

preparation he has put in," said national team coach Tite recently of Brazil's superstar forward.

Close-season talk that PSG were keen to cut their losses and sell Neymar has faded, and he heads to Qatar needing just two goals to draw level with Pele on 77 as Brazil's all-time top goal-scorer.

Eight of Neymar's 75 goals for his country came during Brazil's outstanding World Cup qualifying campaign, as they went unbeaten through 17 games to finish top of the single South American qualifying group.

He set up another eight goals and developed promising relationships with fellow attackers like Richarlison and Lucas Paqueta.

"With Neymar in good form, we have a great chance of winning the World Cup, because he is a player who really can make the difference on the field," Brazil great Cafu said.

Neymar may be fuelled by the desire to finally win a Ballon d'Or, but above all he will be determined to banish the memory of his previous World Cups. Brazil's 2014 cam-

paign ended in a disastrous 7-1 humiliation at home to Germany in the semi-finals.

Yet that only came after Neymar – carrying the weight of a nation on his shoulders – suffered a fractured bone in his back in a challenge by Juan Camilo Zuniga in their last-eight defeat of Colombia.

Four years later Neymar scored in wins over Costa Rica and Mexico but Tite's team underwhelmed as they went out in the quarter-finals to Belgium. Neymar's international disappointment also extended to the 2019 Copa America, which Brazil won without him as he recovered from an ankle ligament

injury. ankle ligament

He was back as Brazil hosted last year's Copa, but could not prevent them losing the final to Argentina at the Maracana. So far success with his country has been limited to the 2013 Confederations Cup and an Olympic gold at the Rio Games in 2016. "I hope he is in inspired form so that Brazil have a greater chance of reaching the final" Careca, who

played for the Selecao at the 1986 and 1990 World Cups, said.

Yet Neymar's fine form on the pitch comes as he continues to make headlines off the field. Prosecutors in Spain recently dropped corruption and fraud charges against Neymar and several others accused in a trial over his 2013 move from Santos to Barcelona.

Meanwhile he also came in for criticism after coming out in support of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro in the Brazilian presidential election campaign.

"It would be marvellous: Bolsonaro re-elected, Brazil champions and everybody would be happy," he said while joining in a campaign rally online from Paris.

Neymar promised to dedicate his first goal in Qatar to Bolsonaro, who lost the election to the leftist candidate Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. In a polarised country, marked by four years under Bolsonaro and the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic which has caused almost 700,000 deaths, many observers have been critical of Neymar's decision to back the outgoing president.

Nevertheless, Neymar is focused on his World Cup goal. "I have a dream of winning it," he said in a recent interview with PSG's website.





Qatar's golden

The country's sporting rise has coincided with development of stunning football infrastructure that is quite simply the envy of the world. It is fitting they now make their World Cup debut on home soil



By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

The year is 2014. A young forward – with potential to be a star for his country – is aiming big. He gets the stage and delivers. That young player was Akram Afif who found the net for Qatar U-19 squad battling North Korea in the final of the AFC Asian Cup in Myanmar in October that year. Afif, just 17 then, scored the only goal of the final in the 52nd minute as Qatar became the Asian champions in U-19. That was the beginning of Qatar's resurgence in regional and Asian football. Fast forward to today, Afif and his teammate from those years, Almoez Ali, will lead Qatar's charge as they prepare to make their FIFA World Cup debut against Ecuador at Al Bayt Stadium today. Afif, the Al Sadd star, and Almoez, the Al Duhail captain, were two of the heroes who guided Qatar to their 2019 AFC Asian Cup title winning campaign in the UAE.

Thanks largely to former Barcelona youth coach Felix Sanchez – who has guided the two young players and a series of other young players over the last seven-eight years – Qatar has charted their journey to the World Cup debut in an inspiring manner. The message then was: get hold of them young, groom them under the tutelage of fitness experts and specialised coaches, pick the sharper ones for age specific tournaments for exposure sake and eventually and help the quality young players graduate to the Qatar national side.

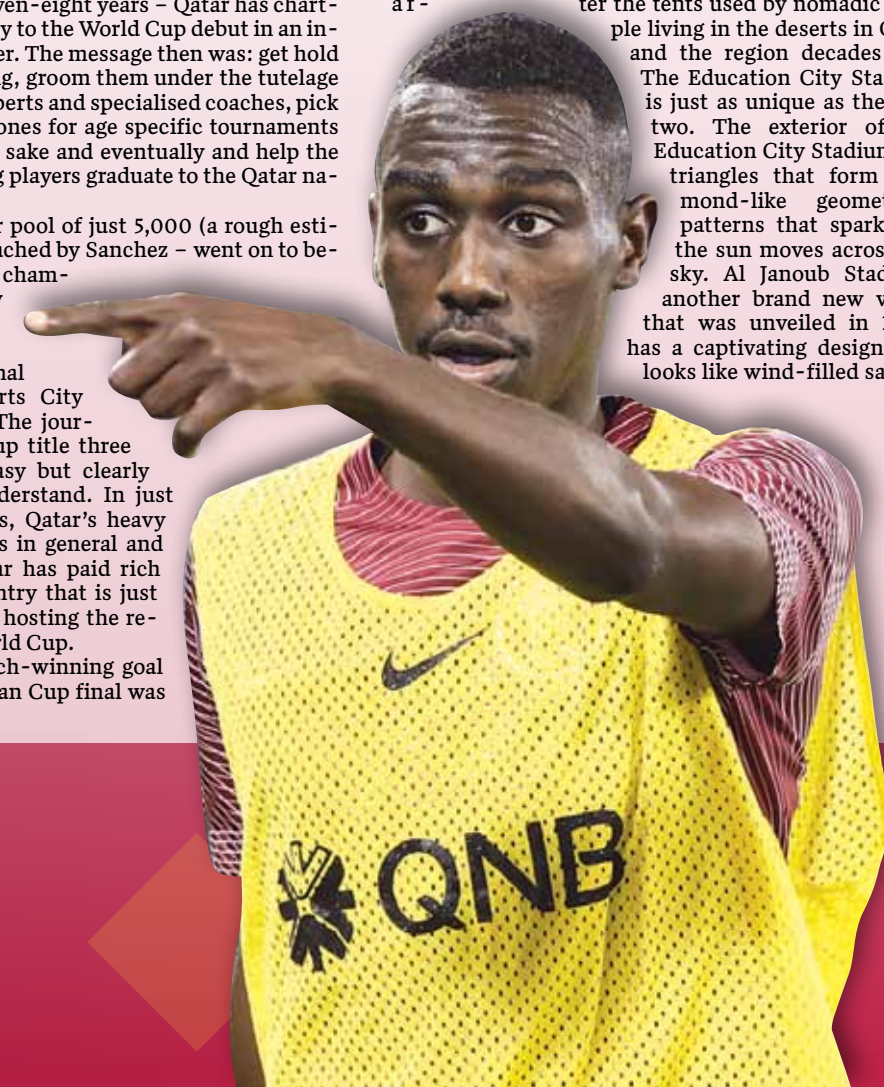
With a player pool of just 5,000 (a rough estimate), Qatar – coached by Sanchez – went on to become the Asian Cup champions in February 2019 when they beat three-time champions Japan in the final held at Zayed Sports City Stadium in Dubai. The journey to the Asian Cup title three years ago wasn't easy but clearly not too hard to understand. In just a little over 15 years, Qatar's heavy investment in sports in general and football in particular has paid rich dividends for a country that is just 24 hours away from hosting the region's first FIFA World Cup.

Just as Afif's match-winning goal in the AFC U-19 Asian Cup final was

a watershed moment in the country's football journey, the platform to excel on a football field took scientific root when FIFA World Cup heroes Pele and Diego Maradona touched down in Doha for the inauguration of the Aspire Academy in November 2005. The world's largest indoor sports facility – replete with the most modern set-up to groom young kids for a sound beginning to their cherished dreams – the Aspire Academy has given Qatar football players like Afif, Almoez, Saad al-Sheeb and even global track and field star Mutaz Essa Barshim.

In between building a strong base for young players who could go on to deliver positive results on the field of play, Qatar has developed stunning football infrastructure that is quite simply the envy of the football world. After winning the FIFA World Cup bid race for the 2022 edition, Qatar has built seven brand new venues – each a viewing spectacle in itself – and completely revamped the iconic Khalifa International Stadium that was built in 1976.

Among the seven new 2022 FIFA World Cup venues, one is in the shape of a 'gahfiya', a traditional woven cap worn by men and boys across the Middle East. Another is the 60,000-seat Al Bayt Stadium which is designed after the tents used by nomadic people living in the deserts in Qatar and the region decades ago. The Education City Stadium is just as unique as the first two. The exterior of the Education City Stadium has triangles that form diamond-like geometrical patterns that sparkle as the sun moves across the sky. Al Janoub Stadium, another brand new venue that was unveiled in 2019, has a captivating design that looks like wind-filled sails of



Ahlan Wa Sahlan, folks!



Star Player

Van Dijk ready to lead resurgent Dutch at World Cup

AFP
Doha

As the Netherlands return to the World Cup after missing out in 2018 they will be led by Virgil van Dijk, who has grown into one of the game's best defenders.

Runners-up in 1974, 1978 and 2010, the Netherlands came within a penalty shootout of reaching a fourth World Cup final in 2014 when Louis van Gaal's squad defied expectations to make the semi-finals.

The straight-talking Van Gaal is back for a third stint in charge of the national team, courageously coming out of retire-

ment while receiving treatment for aggressive prostate cancer.

The 71-year-old underwent 25 bouts of radiotherapy, including during training camps with the national team, and watched from a wheelchair following a bike accident as the Dutch qualified for Qatar last November.

Van Gaal, christened the 'Iron Tulip' in his homeland for his authoritarian style, overlooked a young Van Dijk for the 2014 finals, but the Liverpool centre-back has since developed into the steel backbone around which the team is built.

Van Dijk also missed out on Euro 2020 last year after tearing his anterior cruciate ligament.

So remarkably, through a combination of circumstance

and misfortune, only now is the 31-year-old set to appear at his first major international tournament.

"We have to believe in our qualities and ourselves and be confident," Van Dijk said.

"We have a fantastic manager, an experienced manager. We have players who play at the highest level, the biggest clubs in the world."

Van Dijk's emergence coincided with a transitional period for the Dutch, who failed to qualify for Euro 2016 and the 2018 World Cup.

The Oranje suffered a disappointing last-16 exit at Euro 2020 without the injured Van Dijk, but they are unbeaten in 15 games since the reappointment

of Van Gaal in August 2021.

"We have experience, we have talent, we have a good mixture. First and foremost we have team spirit – I think that's the start to the key to success," said Van Dijk. "It's not guaranteed success of course but it's a good way to start and we're looking forward to the first game."

RISE TO THE TOP

Van Dijk became the world's most expensive defender when Liverpool signed him for £75mn from Southampton in January 2018.

Liverpool finished runners-up to Real Madrid in the Champions League a few months later, but the Reds got their hands on European club's football biggest

prize the following season.

Van Dijk lost out on the 2019 Ballon d'Or to Lionel Messi by a handful of votes but earned the recognition of his peers by winning the English PFA Players' player of the year prize.

He played every minute during the Covid-interrupted 2019-20 campaign as Liverpool ended a 30-year wait for the English title, only for injury to then strike him down.

Van Dijk chose to give himself time to fully heal instead of rushing back for Euro 2020, but he has made up for lost time as evidenced by a recent report by global players' union FIFPro.

It showed Van Dijk had played the most minutes of those analysed – 7,597 in 78 games – be-



Netherlands defender Virgil van Dijk takes part in a training session in Doha yesterday.

tween July 12, 2021 and October 24 this year.

The report highlighted the unprecedented demands posed by a mid-season World Cup, but in Qatar Van Dijk at least will finally get his chance on the biggest stage.

"It's going to be a very big one against the African champions," he said of tomorrow's Group A

opener against a Senegal side missing star man Sadio Mane, a close friend of Van Dijk's.

"I'm very sad for him that he's going to miss the tournament," said Van Dijk. "I'm definitely going to miss seeing him out there. (But) we'll do everything in our power to get a good result and start our World Cup in the best way possible."

Spotlight

Poland's Cash asks Aston Villa teammate Martinez for World Cup favour



Poland's defender Matty Cash looks on during a press conference at the Al Kharaitiyat SC in Doha, yesterday.

Reuters
Umm Salal

Poland defender Matty Cash had a special request for Aston Villa teammate and Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez ahead of their meeting at the World Cup: to get him Lionel Messi's shirt.

Premier League colleagues Cash and Martinez will turn rivals when Poland take on Argentina in Group C on Nov 30.

Asked if he had been in touch with Martinez ahead of the tournament, Cash told reporters yesterday: "No bets. I asked him for Messi's shirt, if that's possible."

"Obviously when we step on the pitch, we become rivals although we are teammates at Villa. It's another massive game against a really strong opponent."

In Qatar, English-born defender Cash will play his first major tournament with Poland after being granted citizenship last year.

The 25-year-old, who has seven caps for Poland, qualified for citizenship through his mother and grandfather.

"Everybody dreams of playing at a major tournament and it has come now (at the World Cup), which is really exciting," Cash said. "I really like pressure and think playing in the Premier League is pressure in itself...I want to prove myself on the biggest stage and this is the time to do it."

Poland begin their World Cup campaign on Tuesday against Mexico, whom Cash described as a very strong team.

"Mexico are good but we have to believe we are better," he added. "In our camp, we have to focus on ourselves and get ourselves right."

Favourites Brazil land for Qatar 2022



Brazil's forward Neymar arrives at the Hamad International Airport in Doha yesterday. (AFP)



Brazil players on their arrival at the Hamad International Airport in Doha yesterday. The five-time winners were the last team to arrive for the World Cup. Brazil, boasting a star-studded forward line led by PSG striker Neymar, are favourites to win the tournament for the first time since 2002, with Lionel Messi's Argentina and France also heavily fancied. Brazil start their campaign on Thursday against Serbia. They also take on Switzerland and Cameroon in Group G. (Reuters)

FIFA partners with UN agencies to run social campaigns during World Cup

As the clock ticks towards the kick-off of the FIFA World Cup 2022, the world's attention turns increasingly towards the biggest celebration of its most popular sport.

Naturally, this attention will be focused on the football, however FIFA also recognises that our sport should use the unique platform our competition provides to make a positive impact on society.

In line with the approach adopted in all tournaments, FIFA, together with three United Nations agencies, will run a range of campaigns during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 to send messages promoting health, unity and non-discrimination to the billions of worldwide viewers across multiple channels. These campaigns have taken into account feedback received from our member associations who, like FIFA, are committed to using the power of football to effect positive change around the world.

Each round of matches will be associated with its own dedicated campaign designed to maximise reach and impact. These will be run together with FIFA's partner agencies from the United Nations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Messaging opportunities will be



provided to the participating teams via the team captains' armbands during matches, with supporting content being displayed on LED screens around the pitch, on giant screens and on flags in the stadiums, together with additional amplification on FIFA's digital platforms and through media, stakeholders, and other public activities.

The campaigns are as follows:

- Group stage, round one:** #FootballUnitesTheWorld
- Group stage, round two:** #SaveThePlanet
- Group stage, round three:** #ProtectChildren
- Round of 16:** #EducationForAll
- Quarter-finals:** #NoDiscrimination
- Semi-finals:** #BeActive
- #BringTheMoves**
- Third-place and Final:** Football Is Joy, Passion, Hope, Love and Peace - #FootballUnitesTheWorld

The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 kicks off today, in which the host nation takes on Ecuador at Al Bayt Stadium. In total, 64 matches will be played with Lusail Stadium hosting the final on December 18.

By uniting behind these campaigns, FIFA and its 211 member associations will showcase to every corner of the world that, despite our differences, football has the power as a global force to bring people together for the common good.

Bottomline

FIFA unveils Technical Study Group for World Cup Qatar 2022

FIFA has unveiled the Technical Study Group (TSG), which will provide cutting-edge analysis of all FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 matches while increasing and developing understanding of the game across the world.

Led by FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development Arsene Wenger, the TSG consists of Jurgen Klinsmann (Germany), Alberto Zaccheroni (Italy), Cha Du-Ri (Korea Republic), Sunday Oliseh (Nigeria), Faryd Mondragon (Colombia) and Pascal Zuberbuhler (Switzerland). The TSG will be supported by FIFA's Head of High Performance Programme Ulf Schott and Group Leader Football Performance Analysis & Insights Chris Loxston, as well as by a team of football analysts, data engineers, data scientists and performance analysts based in both Qatar and Wales.

During the event, FIFA will share the most modern metrics



The group members pose for a photo.

and performance data in the tournament's history with the worldwide TV and online audience, as well as with the participating teams and their players.

Developed by the FIFA High Performance team and Arsene Wenger, the Enhanced Football Intelligence service will offer new and exciting insights to enrich the coverage and analysis of every game at the tournament through a unique set of in and post-match visuals presented as augmented reality

and traditional graphics.

Besides analysing the action on the pitch, the TSG will study trends and benchmarks for the future of the game and their impact on coach education and talent development.

"We want to describe, analyse and interpret what is happening on the pitch to inspire technical experts and football fans in general," said Wenger. "We will not only be collecting more data than before, but we will also be aiming to find the right balance

between technical expertise and data. And we want to inform people about our technical observations directly and during the tournament itself, not months after the tournament." The team in Qatar will be in the stadium analysing the systems of play, the tactical strategy along with monitoring individual player performances for their selection of the FIFA awards at the final.

They are supported by a large team of analysts monitoring, tracking and coding the performance of every player, noting their movements with and without the ball, how many times they break through lines, and how much pressure they put on opposition ball carriers.

This analysis means that over 15,000 data points will be collected per game. The home of the TSG is the FIFA Training Centre, an innovative platform that is available to players and coaches all across the world. (FIFA.com)



Announcement

beIN SPORTS to broadcast 22 matches of Qatar 2022 free-to-air to celebrate first World Cup in Arab world

In a great celebration of the first World Cup in the Arab world, beIN MEDIA GROUP (“beIN”) announced today that it will broadcast 22 matches of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 on its free-to-air beIN SPORTS channel in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).
The free-to-air coverage will kick off with the opening match on November 20, at the Al Bayt Stadium as Qatar takes on Ecuador.
The announcement means millions of fans and families across the 24 country Mena region can celebrate and experience the magic of the World Cup, held for the first time in their home region.
The free-to-air beIN SPORTS channel will be the home of these 22 free broadcasts, which will sit alongside the full 64 match and wider

coverage of the tournament on the beIN SPORTS MAX channels.
beIN SPORTS is the Official Broadcaster and exclusive broadcast rights holder of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 across 24 countries in Mena, playing a central role in showcasing the historic tournament around the world.
“This is a celebration of a World Cup in and for the Arab world. We are thrilled to be able to offer key matches free-to-air to the region’s passionate football fans,” CEO of beIN – Mena Mohamed al-Subaie said.
“When we first became Official Broadcaster of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, our mission was to pursue every opportunity to open up access to the tournament to the multitude of fans in this region. We remain committed to making

our content widely available and we know how significant and unifying this tournament is for us all.”
Yesterday’s announcement comes shortly after beIN unveiled its extensive coverage plans on beIN SPORTS for the entire tournament.
In addition to the content offered free-to-air, subscribers to beIN SPORTS will also have access to every single game of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, with every minute of all 64 matches live in four languages, on seven dedicated channels, together with the best commentators, angles and analysis broadcast straight to their TVs, mobiles and tablets.
This complete package of live coverage will also be complemented by beIN’s signature high quality support programming.



Focus

Ronaldo ‘motivated’, Portugal atmosphere ‘top’: Silva

‘I don’t see any strange atmosphere in our team between Cristiano and another player. It is his matter that he has to resolve’



Portugal’s Cristiano Ronaldo (second from right) takes part in a training session alongside teammates at the Shahaniya Sports Club yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Doha
Bernardo Silva insisted the atmosphere around Portugal’s World Cup camp was “top, top, top,” despite mounting controversy generated by Cristiano Ronaldo’s recent interview in England.
Five-time Ballon d’Or winner and all-time top international goalscorer in men’s football Ronaldo lashed out at his club Manchester United and coach Erik ten Hag earlier this week when speaking to *TalkTV*.
Questions about Ronaldo dominated Silva’s press conference and the Manchester City

midfielder was not keen to respond in depth, although he did say the forward was focused and motivated. “The news from England has nothing to do with the national team,” said Silva.
“It also has nothing to do with me, so I won’t comment. I’m not a Manchester United player, even if I were, I wouldn’t answer. They’re a rival club, it’s nothing to do with me.”
However, repeatedly asked about Ronaldo and whether there was any tension in the camp after he appeared to share a frosty interaction with club teammate Bruno Fernandes, Silva responded. “I don’t see any strange atmosphere in our team between Cristiano and another player,” he said.

“It is his matter that he has to resolve individually with the right person.”
“I a motivated and focused Ronaldo, like everyone else, and he is another player here to help our country and the national team. There is a lot of talk about this topic, but we have a World Cup to play. I don’t understand the persistence because there is nothing there.”
Portugal shone in their 4-1 win over Nigeria without Ronaldo, but Silva said it was normal that the team could function well without their talisman.
“He’s part of the team, obviously, but when he’s not there, we know how to respond. Whenever he wasn’t there, we responded well. We’re ready.

“There are 26 of us, it doesn’t matter if it’s one person or another (playing).”
Ronaldo is set to appear at his fifth World Cup and Euro 2016 winners Portugal open their campaign against Ghana on November 24, before facing Uruguay and South Korea.
Meanwhile Ronaldo’s teammate Anthony Elanga said his criticism of younger players at United is understandable, Ronaldo told TalkTV that younger players “have things more easily, everything’s easy, they don’t suffer – and don’t care.”
When asked if the interview would have a bearing on his relationship with Ronaldo, Elanga told Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*, “not so much. When we

meet, he’s still Cristiano Ronaldo to me.”
The 20-year-old added that Ronaldo had helped him both on and off the pitch since returning to Old Trafford for a second spell in 2021. “He is an inspiration not only to me but to all the young players at United,” the Swedish international said.
“I think he said young players in general. We’re a new generation but I’m always focused on what I’m doing. But I understand him. It’s a lot of phones, a lot of technology and stuff like that.
“It’s quite easy for young players to lose focus, but I’ve always been 100% focused on what I’m doing. I think young players at United listen, but I understand what he means.”

Spotlight

Eriksen says being back at World Cup after collapse is ‘very special’

AFP
Doha
Christian Eriksen says it is “very special” to be back at the World Cup as he seeks to complete a remarkable comeback from his cardiac arrest during the European Championship last year.
The playmaker collapsed on the pitch against Finland in June 2021 and had to be resuscitated in front of a stunned Copenhagen crowd and a television audience of millions.
On the way to hospital he told his wife Sabrina that he would probably never play football again but he was back in action eight months later.
The 30-year-old had an implantable cardioverter defibrillator fitted, which meant he had to quit Inter Milan due to rules in Italy. But he signed for Brentford in the Premier League and also resumed his international career.
“It’s very special to be at a World Cup for your national team,” said Eriksen, who is now at Manchester United. “It’s something I’ve tried before and I’m very happy to be back again.”
“It (the collapse) gave me an appreciation of being alive and being with my family. I think everything else has just

moved to the side.” Denmark, who face Tunisia on Tuesday, will also come up against world champions France in Group D and will fancy their chances after beating Les Bleus home and away in the Nations League earlier this year.
With their talisman back in top form Denmark look an even stronger proposition than the side that was only narrowly eliminated from Euro 2020, in the semi-finals, by England.
“For me personally being part of the team is always good,” said Eriksen. “I hope I can help the team as much as I can in any way.”
“I know we’ve beaten France but normally France in a tournament is a different team compared to the rest of the year. We know what to do and we look forward to it.”
“The national team has always been strong. I do think the belief in the squad and from you guys, the fans, was bigger when I came back from the fall.”
Denmark’s assistant coach Morten Wieghorst said Eriksen was an “inspiration” for his teammates and the rest of his country.
“In my view he’s been even better than he was before the accident,” Wieghorst said. “I really do believe that he’s become an even better player, if that was possible.”



Denmark’s midfielder Christian Eriksen meets with fans at Al Sailiya SC in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

Benzema injured on return to training

Doha: France forward Karim Benzema is to undergo medical tests after leaving training injured yesterday ahead of the defending champions World Cup opener against Australia. The Real Madrid striker has been struggling with a thigh problem since October and has played less than half an hour of football in his club’s last six games.
The 34-year-old’s return to full training was curtailed by the injury with tests later last night due to determine its nature and seriousness, a source close to Les Bleus told AFP. This was the first time Benzema had taken part in full training since Didier Deschamps’s squad met up at their French headquarters of Clairefontaine last Monday.
Under FIFA rules Deschamps can call up a replacement for an injured player until tomorrow, on the eve of their first game against Australia. Doubts over Benzema’s fitness is a major headache for Deschamps, already deprived of the services of midfielders Paul Pogba and N’Golo Kante, number two goalkeeper Mike Maignan, defender Presnel Kimpembe and forward Christopher Nkunku.