

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Pakistan will seek govt nod in potential India T20 finals clash



SPOTLIGHT | Page 3

Virus disrupts ice hockey ahead of Winter Olympics opening ceremony

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Friday, February 6, 2026
Sha'ban 18, 1447 AH

GULF TIMES

SPORT

MOTORSPORT

Qatar International Rally gets underway as al-Attiyah top qualifying stage

Page 4

SPOTLIGHT

Almaty replaces Saudi's Neom as 2029 Asian Winter Games hosts



The signing ceremony was attended by HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia, along with members of the International Olympic Committee and representatives of the National Olympic Committee of Kazakhstan in Milan yesterday, on the sidelines of the 2026 Winter Olympics.

Agencies
Milan

The 2029 Asian Winter Games will take place in the Kazakh city of Almaty, replacing Neom in Saudi Arabia as hosts, the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) announced yesterday.

The event had been due to be held in Neom but it was postponed last month after Riyadh appeared to stall on delivery of the ski resort in the showpiece mega-project and had discussed staging the event four years later than planned.

OCA President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani attended the signing ceremony in Milan with representatives

of National Olympic Committee of Kazakhstan to sign the host city contract, as part of the completion of the institutional procedures approved for hosting the continental event.

"I would like to thank the Kazakhstan government and the city of Almaty for their commitment to the development of winter sports in Asia," Sheikh Joaan said at

the contract signing ceremony in Milan on the eve of the 2026 Winter Olympics.

"Almaty is a city with deep connections to winter sports and we have very fond memories of when we last hosted the Asian Winter Games in 2011," he added. "We are grateful for your ongoing partnership and we have no doubt we'll build on this legacy and host an unforgettable games in 2029."

In 2011, Kazakhstan hosted the event in Almaty and in its capital Astana. Almaty was also an unsuccessful candidate to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, losing out to Beijing. Saudi Arabia was to have hosted the Games in Trojena, planned as a year-round ski resort in the mountains of Neom, a \$500bn project to construct a new city in the country's western desert on the Red Sea.

QATAR MASTERS GOLF

Reed maintains hot streak to share lead with Hillier at DGC

American made flying start with three consecutive birdies and did not record his first par until sixth hole



Patrick Reed of the US plays a shot during the first round of the Qatar Masters at Doha Golf Club yesterday. (AFP)

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Patrick Reed maintained his impressive early-season form to share the first-round lead with Daniel Hillier at the Qatar Masters after both carded seven under par 65s at the Doha Golf Club yesterday.

The 2018 Masters champion arrived in Doha on the back of victory at the Dubai Desert Classic two weeks ago and a runner-up finish following a play-off defeat at last week's Bahrain Championship. Hillier, meanwhile, continued his consistent run, sitting fifth in the season standings after four top-six finishes in five events, including second place at the Dubai Invitational and a tie for fourth in Bahrain.

Reed made a flying start with three consecutive birdies and did not record his first par until the sixth hole, the 15th on his card. Despite a lone bogey, he surged to an outward nine of 31, picking up further birdies at the 16th and 17th. He birdied the first, fourth and seventh before a bogey at the eighth left him tied with Hillier.

The American said: "I hit the ball pretty well, especially early in the round, a lot of my birdies were just kind of kick-ins which is always nice, not having to think too much around there."

Reed added: The golf course, especially when it's windy like this, it requires a lot of shot-making - you have to work the ball both ways, or flight things down, or take it up in the air. That's the kind of golf I like. I like to get creative when I'm out there and a golf course like this with a lot of doglegs and cross-winds, it allows you to do that. It's just one of these places that kind of suits my eye."

Hillier also started from the tenth with a pair of birdies, with another at the 16th taking him out in 33. The New Zealander picked up another three in four holes from the third and after his only bogey of the day at the eighth, a closing eagle provided the perfect finish to his round.

"Yeah, that was nice," he said. "I was a little frustrated with a soft bogey there on (my 17th hole) but nice to get a couple back at the end. My game's feeling really good so I'm just trying to ride the wave, I guess."

There was a Scandinavian flavour to the chasing pack, with Sweden's Marcus Kinhult, Dane Jacob Skov Olesen and Fin-



New Zealand's Daniel Hillier looks on after playing a shot on the 11th hole. (AFP)

land's Oliver Lindell all at six under. They were joined late in the day by Spain's Angel Ayora and Italy's Gregorio De Leo, the latter ending his round with a bogey at the ninth hole to deny him a share of the lead.

Another Swede, Joakim Lagergren, was five under alongside New Zealand's Kazuma Kobori. David Micheluzzi provided one of the highlights of the day with a hole-in-one at the third hole. The Australian was one under par for his round.

It was a landmark day for Ireland's three-time Major Champion Padraig Harrington, who made his 500th start on the DP World Tour and was presented with a silver platter by tournament director Mikael Eriksson to mark the occasion. Harrington also shot a one-under-par 71, with birdies at the ninth and tenth offset by a bogey at the 15th.

QATAR'S SOKOLOV, AL-KAABI KEEP CUT HOPES ALIVE

Qatar's Daniel Sokolov and Saleh al-Kaabi produced steady performances, carding identical rounds of 74 - two over par - to keep their hopes of making the cut alive.

Play was suspended for the night with four groups still on the course. Among them was Qatar's Ali al-Shahrani, who endured a difficult round and was 12 over par through 16 holes. Adri Arnaus and Francesco Laporta, both at two under par, were the leading players among the 12 golfers



Qatar's Saleh al-Kaabi carded two over par 74 to stay in contention to make the cut.

yet to complete their rounds. Al-Kaabi said competing on home soil provides both strong motivation and added responsibility to perform at his best. He noted that he enters the tournament with high confidence following an intensive preparation period and encouraging results in recent regional and continental events.

The Qatari golfer added that his familiarity with Doha Golf Club offers a valuable advantage, helping him maintain focus and deliver consistent performances throughout the tournament.

"I feel that I am enjoying one of my best seasons technically and mentally. My preparation has been strong and I know the competition will be tough with the presence of elite international players and former champions, but I am ready for the challenge and aim to take each round step by step," al-Kaabi said.

He stressed that his main target is to make the cut and achieve a result that reflects the development of Qatari golf, adding that fan support will play a key role in boosting players' morale.

Representing Qatar in a tournament of this scale, he said, is a great honour for the country's golfers.

Meanwhile, Sokolov expressed his delight at participating in the Qatar Masters, highlighting the value of competing alongside world-class players and gaining experience from top international stars.

T20 WORLD CUP

Pakistan will seek govt nod in potential India knock out clash

‘It’s sad Bangladesh are not here. They have a very good side. Hopefully they will support us’

AFP
Colombo

Pakistan will seek advice from their government if they reach the knockout phase of the T20 World Cup and meet arch-rivals India, captain Salman Agha said yesterday.

The tournament has been marred by an acrimonious political build-up after Bangladesh were kicked out and Pakistan refused to face co-hosts India in their Group A match.

However, a semi-final or final showdown between the uneasy South Asian neighbours is still a possibility.

“The India game is not in our control. It was the government’s decision and if we have to play them in the semi-final or the final, we will go back to them and act on their advice,” Agha told reporters in Colombo.

Bangladesh refused to play in India, citing security concerns, as relations soured and were kicked out of Group C by the International Cricket Council, to be replaced by Scotland.

Pakistan backed Bangladesh’s plea to have their games moved to Sri Lanka.

The government in Islamabad cleared the national team to take part but ordered them not to



Pakistan captain Salman Agha shares a light moment with Zimbabwe's Sikandar Raza on the eve of the T20 World Cup in Colombo yesterday.

play in the marquee group match against India on February 15.

“It’s sad Bangladesh are not here. They have a very good side.

Hopefully they will support us,” Agha said. Pakistan and India have not played bilateral cricket for more than a decade, and meet

only in multinational events. They will face Namibia, the Netherlands and the United States in the group stage.

“We’re excited to play in this tournament. We lost to USA in the last World Cup and we are determined to put that disappointment behind us and put a few things right,” Agha said.

Pakistan will not only lose two points for forfeiting their India match but will also take a big hit to their net run rate. Even losing one of their group games to bad weather could make it difficult for Pakistan to qualify.

“We know the margin for error is small, but we can’t control the weather. We are here to play good cricket and we’re not bothered about the conditions,” Agha said.

Pakistan, the 2009 champions, arrive after a 3-0 whitewash of Australia at home.

“We’ve been playing really good cricket. We haven’t lost a series since the Asia Cup last year. Everything is coming along nicely and we’re confident of doing well,” Agha said.

All of Pakistan’s games will be played in Sri Lanka, where they toured in January.

“Very happy to play in Sri Lanka – it’s a second home for me. This is my sixth visit, we know the conditions and we get a lot of support,” Agha said.

India to travel for Pakistan clash despite boycott, says captain Suryakumar

India captain Suryakumar Yadav said yesterday that his team would show up in Colombo for their T20 World Cup clash against Pakistan, despite their Group A opponents and arch-rivals boycotting the match. “We haven’t said no to playing them (Pakistan),” Yadav told reporters at Mumbai’s Wankhede stadium, where India will begin their campaign against the United States on tomorrow’s opening day. “They are the ones who have said no. Our flights are booked and we are going to Colombo.” India need to be at the stadium and ready to take the field for the February 15 match in order to make sure of being awarded the two points for a match forfeit. The tournament, co-hosted by Sri Lanka and India, has been overshadowed by weeks of political posturing in the build-up. Bangladesh were kicked out for refusing to play in India and Pakistan’s government then told its team not to show up at the clash of the arch-rivals as a show of support for Bangladesh. Pakistan and India have not played bilateral cricket for more than a decade, and meet only in global or regional tournaments events. India start the T20 World Cup on home soil with a great chance of retaining the title they won two years ago and Yadav agreed they were the side to beat. “The way we have been playing, it looks like we are the favourites,” he smiled. If that seemed like an overconfident statement, the India captain was quick to caution: “There are 19 (other) good teams in the tournament, though. “On a given day, when you play, you have to bring your A-game and play good cricket.”

India know that their opening opponents, the United States, caused the biggest upset of the 2024 tournament when they beat Pakistan in a super over. Yadav said no team would be taken lightly. “I’m sure every game will be very important,” he said.

Sickness hits New Zealand camp in leadup to T20 World Cup

New Zealand batters Rachin Ravindra and Devon Conway have been struck down with illness ahead of the T20 World Cup but head coach Rob Walter is hopeful of a clean bill of health before their tournament gets underway. Walter said the duo would miss a warmup match against the United States in Mumbai, while top-order batter Finn Allen will also rest as he recovers from a shoulder injury. “There’s a bit of illness in the camp unfortunately at the moment so Devon and Rachin are struggling with a viral infection which I suppose is part and parcel of touring,” Walter told reporters yesterday. “Rachin’s next door to me and it hasn’t sounded good all night, so I think he might be struggling.” New Zealand launch their bid for a maiden T20 World Cup title against Afghanistan in Chennai on Sunday. All-rounder Michael Bracewell missed the recent 4-1 loss to India in the T20 warmup series with a calf injury but Walter expects him to be fit for Afghanistan, along with Allen. “Everyone’s sort of on track at this stage to be fit and healthy for game one, which is good news,” he said. New Zealand have struggled to build momentum since arriving in the subcontinent, with Jimmy Neesham falling ill and paceman Lockie Ferguson coming back from injury.

Sri Lanka urge Pakistan to reconsider India game boycott

Sri Lanka’s cricket board yesterday asked Pakistan to reconsider its decision to boycott their first-round encounter with arch-rival India in the T20 World Cup co-hosted by the island. Pakistan decided not to play India on February 15 in Colombo to express solidarity with Bangladesh, who were excluded from the tournament after refusing to play their matches in India. Pakistan and India have not played bilateral cricket for more than a decade and meet only at global or regional tournament events. Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) told the Pakistan Cricket Board that a boycott would result in a financial

hit and also hurt the island’s tourism industry, which is still recovering from the 2022 economic meltdown. “Any non-participation will have wide-ranging implications, including substantial financial exposure for SLC and the potential loss of anticipated tourism inflows,” the board said. It recalled that Sri Lanka had toured Pakistan to express solidarity and revive international matches there when other nations stayed away due to security concerns. “We urge you to take into account the exceptional circumstances, the enduring relationship

between our two boards, and the broader interests of the game of cricket,” Sri Lanka Cricket said pleading with Pakistan to play their scheduled match against India. India start the T20 World Cup on home soil against the US on Saturday. Pakistan play their first match of the tournament, also on Saturday, in Colombo against the Netherlands. Despite Pakistan’s boycott of their scheduled match against India on February 15 in Colombo, the arch-rivals may be forced to play each other if they reach the knockout stage.

SPOTLIGHT

Stokes suffers facial injury

AFP
London

England Test captain Ben Stokes has suffered a severe facial injury after being struck by a cricket ball.

The 34-year-old all-rounder posted a picture on Instagram showing his right eye heavily swollen and bruised, a graze on his cheek and lip, and a bandage stuffed in his nose.

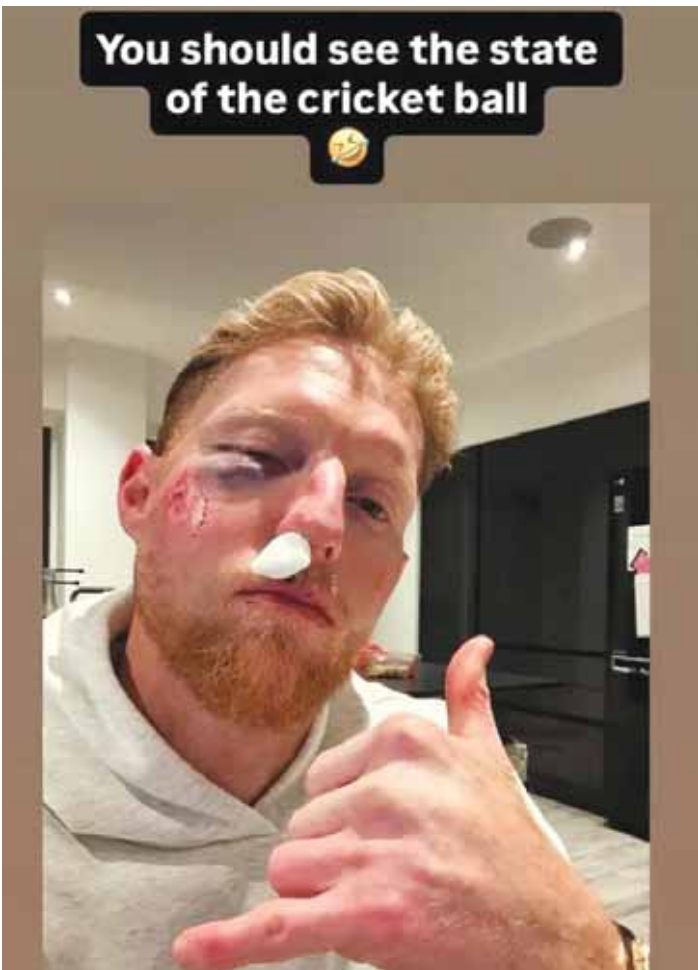
“You should see the state of the cricket ball,” read Stokes’ caption of the picture, alongside a laughing face emoji. Stokes is back in England following a woeful Ashes tour, which ended with a 4-1 series loss to Australia last month.

Although Stokes has made it clear he wants to continue to captain the red-ball side, his position remains uncertain amid an England and Wales Cricket Board review. England coach Brendon McCullum has labelled some of the ensuing fall-out from the Ashes “out of order”.

Stokes is no longer a member of England’s white-ball set-up and won’t feature in the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka that starts this weekend.

He could next play for Durham in the early rounds of the County Championship before England begin their home Test season against New Zealand at Lord’s on June 4 – Stokes’s 35th birthday. Stokes is currently recovering from an adductor injury suffered during the fifth Ashes Test in Sydney in January.

The injury prevented him from bowling in Australia’s second in-



nings and completed a frustrating tour for the England skipper, who bowled well throughout the series but struggled with the bat.

Stokes’ groin problem is the latest of several injuries that have blighted his career.

In 2024, he tore his hamstring twice and he finished last season’s home series against India on the sidelines due to a shoulder problem, having undergone an operation in late 2023 to deal with knee issues.

Gaudenzi re-elected for third term as ATP chairman

Andrea Gaudenzi has been re-elected as the ATP chairman for a third term through 2028, the men’s tennis governing body said in a statement yesterday. Italian Gaudenzi, a former player, has chaired the ATP since 2020, overseeing a \$100mn increase in player compensation, which reached an all-time high of \$269.6mn in 2025. The Tour has expanded to over 300 players during

his tenure. The gruelling tennis calendar has been criticised by players, but Gaudenzi defended it, saying that as independent contractors they controlled their own schedules. “When I reflect on what we’ve achieved, I see a sport with stronger foundations than ever, underpinned by record growth that speaks to tennis’s potential. Now is the time to keep pushing,” Gaudenzi said.

CRICKET

Bengaluru win second WPL title

Reuters
Vadodara

Royal Challengers Bengaluru pulled off the biggest successful chase in the Women’s Premier League to win their second title in the Indian franchise-based Twenty20 league yesterday, handing Delhi Capitals their fourth straight defeat in the final.

Put in to bat first, Delhi posted a commanding 203-4, but Bengaluru rose to the challenge in Vadodara, led by a 165-run second-wicket partnership between captain Smriti Mandhana and Georgia Voll.

With eight needed from the last four balls, Radha Yadav hit two straight boundaries to clinch the six-wicket win, securing Bengaluru’s second WPL title after a triumph in 2024. “We did think it was a good surface to bat on, but of course, 200-plus in the final is definitely a good score... Voll led the way. Her in-

tent was spot-on,” said player of the match Mandhana, praising her Australian teammate.

Delhi openers Shefali Verma and Lizelle Lee had quickly added 49 runs within the first six overs, before captain Jemimah Rodrigues (57) and Laura Wolvaardt (44 off 25) added 76 runs for the third wicket. Wolvaardt and an unbeaten Chinelle Henry (35 of 15) added 49 runs in the last three overs to get Delhi over the 200-run mark for the second time this season, despite a restricting spell from Lauren Bell, who only allowed 19 runs in her four overs.

Bengaluru, needing to break their own record of successfully chasing down a target of 202 against Gujarat Giants last year, lost opener Grace Harris early, but Voll, in at three, hit six boundaries in the next three overs to get the chase going.

Mandhana joined in, hitting three sixes in her innings of 87 off just 41 balls, while Voll scored 79 off 54 before falling to Minnu Mani, as Bengaluru got within

27 runs of the target with three overs to spare.

Delhi, who have made it to every final in the WPL’s four-year history, tried to fight back in the 19th over, as Henry (2-34) bowled Mandhana and got Yadav to top-edge the next ball to extra cover, but Mani dropped the catch. Yadav made no mistake in hitting the winning runs in the final over. Rodrigues said she was proud of her team’s hard work to reach a fourth straight final, the season ending in yet another heartbreak.

“It was not easy for us, but the kind of character our girls showed for us to just make it to the finals, it’s something I’m so proud of and I couldn’t ask for anything better,” she said.

BRIEF SCORES: Royal Challengers Bengaluru 204 for 4 (Mandhana 87, Voll 79, Henry 2-34) **beat Delhi Capitals** 203 for 4 (Rodrigues 57, Wolvaardt 44, Lee 37, Henry 35*) **by six wickets.**



Royal Challengers Bengaluru’s players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Women’s Premier League final against Delhi Capitals at the Kotambi Stadium in Vadodara yesterday. (AFP)

HORSE RACING

Casamento leads Silca Blue to easy Al Markhiya Cup win

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Silca Blue delivered a strong performance to claim the Al Markhiya Cup, the day's feature 1200m contest for three-year-old Thoroughbreds at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The triumph further enhanced the excellent record of the Sheikh Abdul Rahman Rashid al-Thani-owned colt, marking his third victory from nine career starts.

The bay was patiently ridden just behind the leading pack before being unleashed in the home straight, where he swept past his rivals to record a decisive 2¼-length victory. The success capped a phenomenal day for the trainer-jockey combination of Gas-sim al-Ghazali and Marco Casamento, with the duo registering four wins on the card.

Earlier, Manos Arriba (Thoroughbred Maiden Plate), Malik (Local Thoroughbred Handicap) and Loose Cannon (Thoroughbred Handicap) also claimed titles for the pair. In other races, Salman Fahad al-Hajri guided Manassek De La Gloire to victory in the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, while



Jockey Marco Casamento rides Silca Blue to Al Markhiya Cup win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURES: Juhaim**

Acclaim To Royalty won the Thoroughbred Handicap under Tomas Lukasek. Lukasek also steered Shagraan to success in the Purebred Arabian Handicap, while Mou'nes Al Shahania topped the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap under Lukas Delozier.

RESULTS
46TH AL RAYYAN RACE MEET IN AL UQDA - AL MARKHIYA CUP
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Al Markhiya Cup, 3yo Thoroughbreds



Connections of Silca Blue celebrate after the colt won the Al Markhiya Cup.

Silca Blue, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
2 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, Fillies and Mare
Manassek De La Gloire, Yousef al-Jumaili, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
3 - Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, 4-7yo
Manos Arriba, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60), 3yo
Acclaim To Royalty, Mohammed Hassan al-Matwi, Tomas Lukasek

5 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)
Mou'nes Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
6 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60)
Malik, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
7 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (80-100)
Shagraan, Saeed Mohammed Shafi al-Shafi, Tomas Lukasek
8 - Thoroughbred Handicap (80-105)
Loose Cannon, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento

SPOTLIGHT

Virus disrupts ice hockey at Winter Olympics

The opening ceremony will be held in the San Siro stadium in Milan today

AFP
Milan, Italy

Preparations for the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics ratcheted up yesterday on the eve of the opening ceremony while the start of the ice hockey was hit by an outbreak of norovirus.

The most geographically dispersed Games in history officially start with a ceremony in the San Siro stadium in Milan today that will also take in the three other sites spread across the Dolomites. US Vice-President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio arrived in Milan to attend the ceremony, which will feature performances by singer Mariah Carey and Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli.

The first day of the ice hockey competition suffered a setback when a women's game between defending champions Canada and Finland had to be postponed after Finnish players fell ill with norovirus. "The decision was taken following consultations with medical professionals after cases of norovirus were identified within Team Finland," the Milano Cortina 2026 Organising Committee said in a statement.

According to Italian media four Finnish players have contracted the highly contagious virus, a form of gastroenteritis, which causes vomiting and diarrhoea. The game has been postponed until February 12, but other women's games did go ahead.

Meanwhile, the men's downhill skiers got a second taste of the fearsome Stelvio piste



Alex Carpenter of US and Andrea Trnkova of Czech Republic in action during the women's preliminary round ice hockey match at the Milano Cortina 2026 Olympics in Milan. *(Reuters)*

in Bormio, where they will do battle for gold on Saturday in the first major competitive highlight of the Games. The biggest star of these Olympics, American skier Lindsey Vonn, has to wait to test her injured leg after the first women's downhill training in the chic resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo was cancelled due to heavy snow. Vonn's Olympic comeback at the age of 41 depends on

her being able to ski with a ruptured ACL (anterior cruciate ligament).

Away from the sport, Greenpeace activists staged a protest in Milan against the sponsorship of the Games by energy giant Eni, warning that fossil fuel emissions were threatening the viability of winter sports. Bearing banners saying "Kick polluters out of the Games", the activists set up a model

of the Olympic rings covered in black oil in front of the cathedral in central Milan.

"Sponsorships like Eni's for Milan-Cortina 2026 are not innocent, they are a distraction to make us forget the damage these companies are causing to the planet," Greenpeace Italia said in a statement.

The International Olympic Committee said on Wednesday it had received a petition of 21,000 signatures calling for an end to fossil fuel companies sponsoring winter sports. IOC president Kirsty Coventry said: "We are having conversations in order to be better, and for our stakeholders to be better. But that takes time."

Vance sought to put politics aside when he visited American athletes preparing for their events. "The whole country, Democrat, Republican, independent, we're all rooting for you, and we're cheering for you," he told members of Team USA. "This is one of the few things that unites the entire country," the Republican said, adding: "I hope you win as many medals as possible."

There has been anger in Italy in the build-up after it emerged that agents from the US immigration enforcement agency ICE will have an "advisory" role at the Games. Rome has denied that the agents will have any operational role on its soil.

Italy said on Wednesday it had thwarted a series of Russian cyberattacks targeting the Olympics. A Russian hacker group claimed responsibility for the attack, which it said was in response to the Italian government's support for Ukraine.

Piastrì expects a 'fair shot' from McLaren again in 2026



London: Oscar Piastrì accepts McLaren gave him a "fair shot" at the Formula One title last season and expects the same this year against champion teammate Lando Norris. The Australian led the standings for much of 2025 but ended up third overall, with Norris beating Red Bull's four-times world champion Max Verstappen by two points.

Piastrì and Norris finished with the same number of wins, seven each to Verstappen's eight.

"I think I got a fair shot last year and I'm expecting that to stay exactly the same," Piastrì told reporters at a McLaren media event at the Woking factory.

"That's definitely not to say that certain things could not have been done better last year. I think that was probably clear for everyone watching but for me at no point were there any bad intentions or any times I questioned the intentions of things.

"Things could have been done better, situations could have been handled differently, but that is part of elite sport and part of Formula One." McLaren gave equal treatment to their drivers last year, although there were controversies involving the application of the team's so-called 'Papaya Rules'. One involved the Australian letting Norris past after a botched pitstop by the team at Monza.

Formula One is starting a new era this season with major changes to the engines and aerodynamics in the biggest technical shakeup in decades.

That makes the pecking order little more than guesswork at present, with teams having conducted only a shakedown test behind closed doors in Barcelona last week before two official pre-season tests in Bahrain this month. The first race is in Melbourne, Piastrì's home town, on March 8 and the Australian hoped for better than last year where he spun off and finished ninth.

"Hopefully, it goes a bit better than last year," said Piastrì, who returned to Australia after the season-ending Abu Dhabi race.

"That would be nice but it's going to be such an unknown for everybody that at this point (I'm) just trying to maximise the time I've got in Bahrain, testing and trying to hit the ground running.

"But I think the amount of support I gained over the last 12 months, especially in Australia, it's going to be nice to be back racing at home."

Piastrì had looked forward to watching Australia's triumphant Ashes cricket defence as some small consolation when he left Abu Dhabi. The driver said he had missed out there too.

"I went and saw the one game that England won," he said. "That was karma."

Boxer Khelif reveals 'hormone treatments' before Paris Olympics

Paris: Olympic boxing champion Imane Khelif revealed in an interview with French sports daily *L'Equipe* that she had undergone hormone treatments to lower her testosterone levels ahead of the 2024 Games, but reaffirmed that she is not "transgender".

Khelif was embroiled in a gender row at the Paris Games where she won gold in the women's 66kg category. "I have female hormones. And people don't know this, but I have taken hormone treatments to lower my testosterone levels for competitions," the 26-year-old Algerian said in the interview.

Khelif confirmed she has the SRY gene,

located on the Y chromosome that indicates masculinity.

"Yes, and it's natural," she said, adding that she is "surrounded by doctors, a professor is monitoring me... For the Paris Games qualifying tournament, which took place in Dakar, I lowered my testosterone levels to zero".

Like Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting, who also won gold in another category at the Paris Games, Khelif found herself at the centre of a gender row that attracted comments from US President Donald Trump and *Harry Potter* author JK Rowling.

"I respect everyone, and I respect Trump. Because he is the President of the

United States. But he cannot distort the truth. I am not a trans woman, I am a girl. I was raised as a girl, I grew up as a girl, the people in my village have always known me as a girl," Khelif said.

The boxer, who aims to compete in the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, knows that she will have to agree to mandatory gender testing imposed by World Boxing, a body recognised by the International Olympic Committee, and says she is ready.

"For the next Games, if I have to take a test, I will. I have no problem with that," she said. "I've already taken this test. I contacted World Boxing, I sent them my medical records, my hormone tests, every-

thing. But I haven't had any response. I'm not hiding, I'm not refusing the tests."

Khelif said it was for doctors and professors to "decide", but stated: "We all have different genetics, different hormone levels. I'm not transgender. My difference is natural. This is who I am. I haven't done anything to change the way nature made me. That's why I'm not afraid."

Khelif, who has not fought since the Paris Games, as World Boxing prevented her from participating in last year's tournament in the Netherlands because she had not undergone the newly introduced chromosome test, revealed she is awaiting a French professional boxing licence.

HORWITZ BISHOP ACADEMY HOSTS RAPID CHESS TOURNAMENT



Horwitz Bishop Chess Academy staged a Rapid Chess Tournament at Al Jazeera Academy in Abu Hamour, attracting more than 250 young players and underlining the growing strength of youth chess in Qatar. The one-day event, held on January 23, featured competitions across four age categories - Under-7, 9, 11 and 13. A total of 29 prizes were awarded across the categories. Adinad Anand claimed the U-7 title, while Muhammadh Nusri (U-9), Muhammed Azam (U-11) and Swarit Tejas Mehta (U-13) secured top honours in their respective categories. Former ICBF general secretary Boban Varkey and ICBF legal cell chairman Jaffarkhan M presented prizes to the winners.

MOTORSPORT

Qatar Rally gets underway as al-Attiyah tops qualifying

‘It was a good run and we are quite happy with the performance of the car. Everything was working very well’

By Sports Reporter

Lusail

The Qatar International Rally got underway from the ceremonial start podium at the service park adjacent to the Lusail Sports Arena yesterday.

Twenty-three teams and competitors from 13 nations will tackle a dozen special stages over the weekend on graded gravel special stages to the north of Doha. Cars were flagged over the podium in reverse order by QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad.

A new qualifying stage was held at Al Khor in the morning to determine the starting order amongst the leading six Rally2 crews. This is a new innovation for the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) being trialled by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) for the first time.

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah and Candido Carrera laid down the gauntlet in their Autotek Skoda Fabia RS with a run of 3min 11.1sec but Abdullah al-Rawahi and Ata al-Hmoud dropped 49.7 seconds to the defending champions. The Omani later admitted that his strategy was to start first on the road today.

Abdulaziz and Nasser al-Kuwari were second quickest, 9.6 seconds slower than the stage-winning defending champions. Al-Attiyah said: “It was a good run and we are quite happy with the performance of the car. Everything was working very well. For Qatar Rally, it is better to start behind.”

Al-Kuwari added: “Good recce and good stages. I am looking forward to them. The qualifying stage



Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah laid down the gauntlet in Autotek Skoda Fabia RS by clocking the quickest time on the Qualifying Stage at Al Khor yesterday.

was good. We lost one or two seconds in one corner with a small overshoot but it was a good feeling. I am happy although I think this may be my only rally this year. It's a bad feeling for me because I only do the Baja Cup. I have to accept this and I will do my best. Abdullah's (Al-Rawahi) strategy could be right or it could be wrong. That's his strategy. I think he wanted to open the road. Normally, on this type of stage there is not too much cleaning. It's fast. With every car passing, there are more rocks on the road. It could be good but there could be some loose places and no traction. He knows his plan and he is fighting for the championship.”

Mohammed al-Marri (Citroen C3) and Nasser Khalifa al-Atya (Ford Fiesta) were third and fourth but Hamza Bakhshab and Lor-

can Moore were penalised in their Jameel Motorsport Toyota GR Yaris Rally2 and will now open the road today.

Al-Rawahi and al-Kuwari incurred five-second penalties for clipping a stage gate but Bakhshab earned a 45-second penalty for three similar offences. Al-Rawahi said: “First of all, we don't actually have any parts to push, so we just needed to be clean. We just need to avoid punctures and breaking anything. I think we did the right thing. We had good times in practice. The new stages are similar to the ones we have done before. It's going to be a tough rally.”

The leading six cars will start the opening stage today in reverse order to their finishing positions on the Qualifying Stage.

Before qualifying, the six crews were permitted to carry out two

practice passes through the stage. Al-Attiyah topped the times on his second pass and stopped the clocks in 3min 11.11sec. Al-Kuwari was next up with a best time of 3min 17.10sec, ahead of al-Rawahi (3min 17.25sec), Bakhshab (3min 18.96sec), al-Marri (3min 25.74sec) and al-Atya (3min 30.3sec).

The 17 remaining teams were then permitted to carry out their own pre-rally testing on the same 5.56km stage, which doubled up as the now mandatory Shakedown. Twelve took advantage of the opportunity.

Today's action features two loops of three gravel stages. The morning's itinerary features runs through the brand new Lejthaya (16.54km) and Waab Al Mashrab (16.11km) stages and Al Waab (18.14km). The opening speed



QMMF driver Mohammed al-Marri gets to grips with a Rally2 car in competition for the first time.



Cars were flagged over the podium in reverse order by QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad.

test gets underway at 8:15am and the rapid-fire morning continues with the other two specials going live from 8:43am and 9:20am. The

three will be repeated at 12:25pm, 12:53pm and 1:30pm after a return to Lusail for a late morning re-group and service.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Afif treble sends Sadd top as Gharafa slip to Sailiya defeat

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Akram Afif delivered a sensational hat-trick and an assist as defending champions Al Sadd thrashed Al Shahania 4-0 to climb to the top of the Qatar Stars League at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

The victory lifted Al Sadd to 32 points, one ahead of Al Gharafa, who suffered a shock 1-0 defeat to Al Sailiya at Grand Hamad Stadium. Al Shahania remained in bottom place on 11 points.

Afif opened the scoring from the penalty spot in the 14th minute after Paulo Silva was fouled inside the box, then doubled the lead five minutes into the second half with a composed finish. Claudinho added a third in the 73rd minute from an Afif assist before the Qatar star completed his hat-trick in the 83rd minute after a surging solo run. Al Shahania came close before the break when Moameen Mutasem Ragab struck the post and Meshaal Barsham produced a sharp save moments later, but Al Sadd dominated after the interval.

Snana's late strike sinks Gharafa
Youssef Snana scored deep into stoppage time as Al Sailiya



Akram Afif celebrates after scoring a hat-trick.

stunned Al Gharafa 1-0. Snana's winner came from a rebound after goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar failed to deal with a tame effort from El Ghazi Anwar. The result lifted Al Sailiya to 15 points and further clear of the relegation zone. A fourth-minute effort from Anwar had earlier been ruled out by VAR for a foul in the build-up.

Al Shamal edge Al Arabi
Al Shamal defeated Al Arabi 2-1 at

Al Thumama Stadium to move to third place with 28 points. Omid Ebrahimi opened the scoring from the penalty spot in the 28th minute before Karl Toko-Ekambi equalised for Al Arabi in the 66th. Adam Ounas struck the winner in the 86th minute after al-Mannai had earlier missed a penalty and Baghdad Bounedjah saw a goal disallowed following a VAR review. Al Arabi are in fifth place with 23 points.

SPOTLIGHT

Al-Saai wins two gold medals at Arab Women's Clubs Games

QNA

Doha

Qatari archer Reem al-Saai claimed two gold medals in the eighth edition of the Arab Women's Clubs Games 2026, organised by the Sharjah Women's Sports Foundation and being held from February 2 to 12 with participation of 65 sports delegations from 16 Arab countries competing in nine individual and team sports in one of the largest editions since the start of the event in 2012.

The Qatar Shooting and Archery Association (QSAA) was represented at the championship by shooters al-Saai, Aisha al-Saai and Maha Abdel Hay. Al-Saai won her first gold medal in the individual recurve bow competition.

The second gold medal was won by al-Saai after she won first place in the elimination rounds of the individual recurve bow competition, following a consistent performance in the final round, ahead of Emirati Maha al-Hosani from Sharjah Women's Sports Club who finished second, and Emirati Huda al-Ali from Abu Dhabi Archery Club, who ended third on the podium.

The shooting competitions in the championship witnessed the



participation of five teams: Sharjah Women's Sports Club, Qatar Shooting Sports Club, Kuwait Shooting Club, the Saudi team, in addition to Bahrain's Al Riffa Club, in a championship characterised by a high technical level and strong competition between the participating teams.

Jassim Shaheen al-Sulaiti,

Vice-President of Qatar Shooting Club, expressed his delight at the historic achievement of Reem al-Saai in winning two gold medals in the eighth edition of the Arab Women's Clubs Games 2026 in Sharjah, stressing that this crowning enhances Qatar's position in the sport of shooting in the Arab world.

GUARDIOLA WANTS PERMISSION FOR GUEHI TO PLAY IN LEAGUE CUP FINAL

Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola will ask the Football League for permission to play Marc Guehi in the League Cup final against Arsenal even though the England defender is ineligible for the Wembley showdown.

Guehi, signed from Crystal Palace in January, was forced to watch from the sidelines as City beat Newcastle 3-1 in the semi-final second leg on Wednesday. City's 5-1 aggregate victory set up a date with the Premier League leaders Arsenal in the final on March 22, but Guehi is not currently allowed to feature in the showpiece.

Unlike Antoine Semenyo, who also arrived at City in January from Bournemouth, Guehi is ineligible to play in the League Cup this season because the centre-back joined after the first leg against Newcastle took place.

Guardiola acknowledged he did not expect City to be successful in their plea. But the Spaniard, aware of his team's defensive issues this season and the threat posed by Arsenal, plans to make the case for Guehi's inclusion regardless.

“Why should he not play? Why not?” Guardiola said. “He's our player, we pay his salary, we hired him.”

“We want to ask. I said to the club we have to ask definitely. I don't understand the reason why he cannot play in the final of the League Cup in March when he has been here a long time. “Of course we are going to ask because it's pure logic. But to change the rule, no way. But we will try.”

Omar Marmoush was the star for City as the Egypt forward scored the opening two goals before Tijjani Reijnders

added the third before half-time. Anthony Elanga's 62nd-minute reply for Newcastle came after City had taken their foot off the gas.

City are back in the League Cup final for the first time since 2021 as they look to win the competition for the fifth time in the Guardiola era.

Trailing six points behind Premier League leaders Arsenal after a frustrating 2-2 draw at Tottenham last weekend, City's progress to Wembley was a welcome boost for Guardiola.

“I do not take it for granted,” Guardiola said. “I know how difficult it is.”

“I don't know how many semi-finals and finals we have played in the FA Cup but it's really good, and in 10 years five League Cup finals so it's really good: top, top, top.”

Marmoush grabbed his chance to im-

press against the Magpies after Erling Haaland was reduced to a substitute role following a disappointing recent run for the Norway striker.

“He gives us a special quality,” Guardiola said of the Egyptian.

“His pace, his moments in behind, and his work ethic.”

Newcastle's reign as League Cup holders is over after a pair of error-strewn performances over the two legs left boss Eddie Howe fuming.

“Really annoyed with the first half display,” Howe said.

“We pride ourselves on being really organised and tactically we want to be able to handle any problem the opposition gives us.”

“That first half we weren't good enough individually and our duels were off and it gave us huge problems.”



Manchester City's manager Pep Guardiola reacts after the League Cup semi-final second leg match against Newcastle United in Manchester. (AFP)