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FOCUS

# FIFA World Cup marks 100-day countdown amid global unrest

The greatest footballing show on earth kicks off on June 11 in Mexico City and will conclude on July 19

AFP

Los Angeles

The 100-day countdown to the biggest World Cup in history gets under way tomorrow against a chaotic backdrop of global unrest, from US-Israeli strikes on Iran to surging violence in Mexico and anxiety over Donald Trump's domestic agenda.

A record 48 teams - up from 32 in 2022 - and millions of fans are set to descend on the United States, Canada and Mexico for the first ever World Cup shared by three nations. The greatest footballing show on earth kicks off on June 11 at Mexico City's Estadio Azteca and will conclude nearly six weeks later on July 19 at the 82,500-seater MetLife Stadium just outside New York.

A total of 104 matches will be played across 16 venues and four time zones, with the bulk of the action taking place in the United States, which will host 78 games.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino is confidently predicting a commercial bonanza from the tournament, which is expected to generate record revenues of \$11bn, comfortably eclipsing the \$7bn earned through the 2022 tournament in Qatar.

Infantino has repeatedly described the 2026 tournament's scale as equivalent to "104 Super Bowls", citing a global television audience in the billions and more

than 508 million requests for some seven million tickets.

"The demand is there. Every match is sold out," Infantino said earlier this month.

Yet FIFA's revenues will also be boosted by a ticketing policy that is likely to price out many fans. Fan groups around the world, such as Football Supporters Europe, have accused FIFA of a "monumental betrayal" over pricing.

FIFA responded to those criticisms by introducing a tiny sliver of tickets priced at \$60 for official supporters groups. Beyond the eye-popping numbers, the biggest challenges faced by the tournament may turn out to be political.

The Trump administration's domestic and international policies have triggered concerns about the smooth running of the tournament.

Trade wars which have included co-hosts Canada and Mexico, tensions with European allies over threats to annex Greenland and an immigration crackdown which may complicate travel to the United States for fans of some participating nations have all cast a shadow over the preparations.

Although calls for a boycott have failed to gather serious momentum, the build-up to the tournament continues to be dogged by swirling geopolitical uncertainty.

The US-Israeli strikes on Iran have provided the latest flash-point, with Iran's team due to play its three group games in Los Angeles and Seattle.



Former Mexican footballer Hugo Sanchez (left) and former Brazilian player Roque Junior pose next to the FIFA World Cup trophy during its visit to Zapopan, the second stop on its tour of Mexico, on Saturday. (AFP)

"We had a meeting... and it is premature to comment in detail, but we will monitor developments around all issues around the world," FIFA secretary general Mattias Grafstrom said Saturday.

The Trump administration's immigration crackdown meanwhile has seen enhanced visa restrictions on dozens of countries including four World Cup qualified nations - Iran, Haiti, Senegal

and Ivory Coast. The White House insists this will not affect tourist visas and therefore fans who have tickets, who can benefit from expedited visa appointments.

Another logistical headache has unfolded in Mexico, where the recent killing of one of the country's most notorious drug lords in a military operation sparked a wave of unrest.

The surging violence gripped

Guadalajara, Mexico's second biggest city, which is hosting four World Cup matches.

Both Infantino and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum have both given assurances that the recent unrest will not disrupt World Cup games taking place in the country.

"Very reassured, everything's good," Infantino told AFP at a meeting in Colombia last week

when asked how the violence might impact Mexico's World Cup planning.

MESSI SWANSONG

On the field, meanwhile, the tournament itself faces its own challenges. The expanded 48-team format means that the initial group phase is likely to be stripped of jeopardy.

The top two teams from each of the 12 first round groups, plus the eight best third-placed teams will qualify for the first round of the knockout phase, making it highly unlikely than any of the tournament's traditional big guns will be eliminated at the first hurdle.

When the action does get under way, all eyes will be on defending champions Argentina, who will be spearheaded once more by Lionel Messi, who will celebrate his 39th birthday on June 24, during what is the sixth - and almost certainly last - World Cup of his career.

Argentina's hopes of winning back-to-back World Cup titles will face a stern challenge from 2018 champions France and reigning European champions Spain.

England, coached by Germany's Thomas Tuchel, meanwhile will once again attempt to end the country's 60-year wait for a major tournament victory.

At the other end of the spectrum of contenders will be a handful of teams playing in the World Cup for the first time, including Cape Verde, Curacao, Jordan and Uzbekistan.

FOOTBALL

# Arsenal win set-piece battle to sink Chelsea

AFP

London

Arsenal reestablished a five-point lead at the top of the Premier League as the Gunners overcame 10-man Chelsea 2-1 yesterday, while Benjamin Sesko fired Manchester United up to third with victory over Crystal Palace.

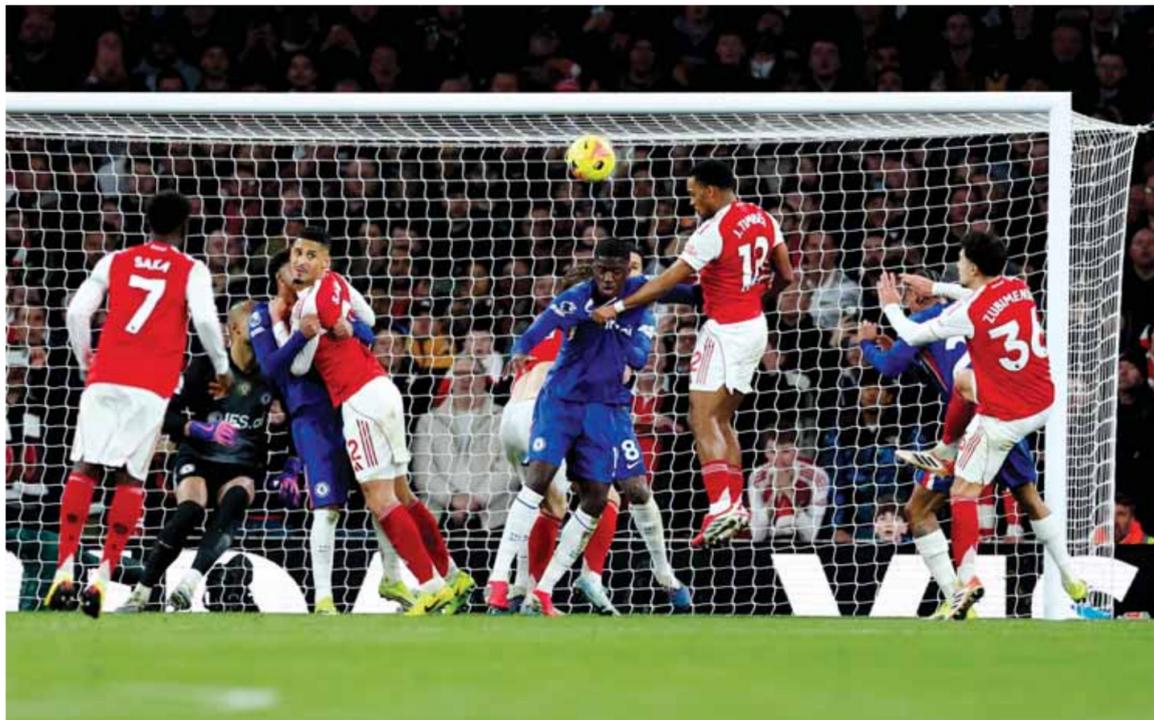
Defenders William Saliba and Jurrien Timber got Arsenal's goals as Chelsea's ill-discipline saw them lose ground in the battle for a place in next season's Champions League after Pedro Neto was sent off 20 minutes from time. The Blues could not cope with Arsenal's prowess from corners as Mikel Arteta's men edged closer to a first league title in 22 years.

Saliba forced home the opening goal on 21 minutes after Gabriel Magalhaes headed Eberechi Eze's delivery back across goal.

Chelsea levelled from a corner of their own when Pedro Hincapie turned Reece James' cross into his own net. Timber's winner just after the hour mark was the 16th goal Arsenal have scored from a corner in the Premier League this season - equalling the competition record.

The Dutch international headed into an empty net after Robert Sanchez got caught underneath Declan Rice's ball in. Neto then became the ninth Chelsea player to see red this season for two quickfire bookings.

Chelsea had a late equaliser ruled out for offside but defeat leaves Liam Rosenior's men three points outside the top five, who



Arsenal's Jurrien Timber scores their second goal against Chelsea at the Emirates Stadium in London yesterday. (Reuters)

will almost certainly secure a place in next season's Champions League.

Second-placed Manchester City still have a game in hand on Arsenal and home advantage when the sides meet in the league next month.

Sesko rewards Carrick faith

Sesko was handed his first start in seven games since Michael Carrick took charge at Old Trafford and rewarded his boss with another vital goal to edge United closer to a return to the Champions League with a 2-1 win.

Palace had taken an early lead at Old Trafford when Maxence Lacroix outmuscled Leny Yoro to guide in a header from Brennan Johnson's corner. But United hit back to remain unbeaten under Carrick and take their tally to 19 points from a possible 21.

The game swung on one incident as Lacroix was sent off and conceded a penalty for pulling back Matheus Cunha just before the hour mark.

Bruno Fernandes confidently stroked the resulting spot-kick past former team-mate Dean

Henderson. Fernandes was then the creator for the second as his curling cross was powered in by Sesko for his seventh goal in his last eight appearances.

"It feels like a big result," said Fernandes. "We were behind and had to show some character."

Now Tudor turnaround for Tottenham

Tottenham remain perilously poised just four points above the relegation zone as interim boss Igor Tudor again failed to halt their alarming slide after a 2-1 defeat at Fulham.

"We were not good, (we) lacked everything attacking and defending," said Tudor after two defeats in his two games in charge.

"There are problems here, big problems. We need to stay calm, believe in what we are doing in training, and get out (of trouble), staying all together."

Harry Wilson and Alex Iwobi gave Fulham a deserved half-time lead as they moved up to ninth and back into contention for European football next season.

Richarlison headed in a late consolation for Tottenham, but they remain the only Premier League side without a win in 2026.

The one crumb of comfort for Spurs was defeat for relegation rivals Nottingham Forest, 2-1 at Brighton.

All three goals arrived in the first 15 minutes as Diego Gomez and Danny Welbeck netted for the Seagulls either side of Morgan Gibbs-White's reply. Forest sit two points above the drop zone ahead of a daunting trip to Manchester City on Wednesday.

## MATCH REPORT

# Samson's 97 puts India into semi-final against England

Samson hits 12 fours and 4 sixes in his superb 50-ball knock in winner-takes-all final Super Eights match

AFP  
Kolkata

Sanju Samson's sparkling unbeaten 97 kept alive India's dream of retaining the T20 World Cup at home as they knocked out the West Indies with a five-wicket win in Kolkata yesterday to set up a semi-final against England.

Samson hit 12 fours and four sixes in his superb 50-ball knock in the winner-takes-all final Super Eights match to thrill a capacity 67,000 fans at a pulsating Eden Gardens.

After the West Indies smacked an impressive 70 off the last five overs to score 195-4 after being asked to bat, India lost two early wickets but were always up with the required rate.

Samson, opening for the second match in succession in this World Cup, led the way.

When India slipped to 41-2 Samson was joined by captain Suryakumar Yadav (18) and the pair added 58 for the third wicket.

Tilak Varma was next to join Samson and scored 27 off 15 before departing in the 15th over with the score 141-4 and India still needing 55.

Samson stood firm and though

Hardik Pandya fell for 17 India reached the target with four balls to spare to spark celebrations and fireworks.

"It means the whole world to me," Samson said. "Right from the day I started playing, started dreaming to play for the country, I think this is the day I was waiting for."

Samson said he learned the art of finishing matches "from the greats like Virat Kohli, from Rohit Sharma."

Suryakumar said: "Obviously it's a great feeling. The way we played, it was a do-or-die game and the boys showed character."

When asked about Samson's innings, he said: "See I always say good things happen to good people who wait, who have a lot of patience. All his hard work, what he has been doing behind the doors when he hasn't been playing, he has got the fruits for it at the perfect stage."

Jason Holder and Rovman Powell earlier put on an unbroken stand of 76 for the fifth wicket to help the West Indies set the defending champions a target of 196 to stay alive.

The West Indies sprang a surprise at the top of the order, promoting Test captain Roston Chase to open alongside T20 skipper Shai



West Indies' Shamar Joseph shakes hands with India's Sanju Samson after the World Cup 2026 Super Eight match at Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. (Reuters)

Hope. That enabled them to bring in an extra spinner, Akeal Hosein, with regular opener Brandon King left out. In their defeat to South

Africa last week the West Indies slumped to 83-7 but the new-look opening partnership was more assured. Spinner Varun Chakra-

varthy got the first breakthrough, bowling Hope for a sluggish 32. Shimron Hetmyer raced to 27 off 12 balls before falling to the faintest

of edges off Jasprit Bumrah to make it 102-2.

After Chase fell for 40 and Sherrane Rutherford followed, Powell and Holder launched their brutal late assault.

Powell finished on 34 not out from 19 balls with two sixes and three fours while Holder was unbeaten on 37 off 22 balls with three sixes and two fours.

"Maybe a few short, especially on a chasing ground such as this," said a disappointed Hope.

"Probably could have gone a bit more at the end. Probably could have got more at the start as well," he added.

It could have been better for India but they dropped three regulation catches in a sloppy fielding display, including Chase when he had made just 15.

South Africa, the only unbeaten side in the tournament, beat Zimbabwe by five wickets earlier yesterday and will face New Zealand in Kolkata in the first semi-final on Wednesday.

The final is in Ahmedabad next Sunday.

## BRIEF SCORES

**India 199 for 5** (Samson 97\*, Tilak 27, Holder 2-38) **beat West Indies 195 for 4** (Chase 40, Holder 37\*, Bumrah 2-36) **by five wickets**

## SPOTLIGHT

## South Africa ease past Zimbabwe by 5 wickets

Reuters  
New Delhi

South Africa thumped Zimbabwe by five wickets in a Super Eights dead rubber to maintain their unbeaten run and set up a semi-final clash against New Zealand at the Twenty20 World Cup yesterday.

The 2024 runners-up chased down a target of 154 with 13 balls to spare to remain the only unbeaten side in this year's 20-team tournament.

Having already qualified for the semi-finals, South Africa rested speedsters Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen and spinner Keshav Maharaj and still restricted Zimbabwe to 153-7 at the Arun Jaitley Stadium.

Zimbabwe skipper Sikandar Raza smashed 73 and returned to claim 3-29 but even his all-round brilliance was not enough to halt the South African juggernaut.

"Nice to get the win," South Africa captain Aiden Markram said yesterday.

"It can be quite tricky when you change the team a bit.

"Obviously with the bat, I'd have loved it to be more clinical, but probably not the worst thing that the middle order was put



South Africa's Dewald Brevis plays a shot during the World Cup Super Eight match against Zimbabwe in New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

under a little bit of pressure and came through."

South Africa began with George Linde's left-arm spin following Raza's decision to bat after winning the toss.

Zimbabwe's top order struggled but Raza counter-attacked in spectacular fashion and raced to a

29-ball fifty. Raza clobbered four sixes and eight fours in his 43-ball blitz before falling to Kwena Maphaka.

Clive Madane made 26 not out down the order but Zimbabwe still settled for a below-par total.

Raza did not throw in the towel, however, and led Zimbabwe's

fightback with the ball. Armed with the new ball, the off-spinner dismissed Quinton de Kock and rival captain Markram in successive overs to jolt South Africa out of any sense of complacency.

Ryan Rickelton smacked four sixes in his 31 but Zimbabwe struck just when a partnership was about to bloom.

Likewise, Dewald Brevis (42) threatened to run away with the game but Raza returned to dismiss the batter to keep Zimbabwe alive in the contest.

Tristan Stubbs (21) and Linde (30) combined in an unbroken stand of 53 to guide South Africa to victory.

"I've never got a man-of-the-match (award) after losing a game but I think I can hold my head high," Raza said.

"We took a bit of beating in the previous two games but with each beating came a valuable lesson," he said.

"We have improved with every game that we have played. At least we now have got a taste of what it needs to be done for us to be a mid-table team."

## BRIEF SCORES

**South Africa 154 for 5** (Brevis 42, Rickelton 31, Raza 3-29) **beat Zimbabwe 153 for 7** (Raza 73, Maphaka 2-21) **by five wickets**

## ANNOUNCEMENT

## Sri Lanka's Jayasuriya to step down, Pakistan's Agha weighs future

Reuters  
Colombo

Sri Lanka's Sanath Jayasuriya said he will step down as head coach, while Pakistan's Salman Agha said he will take time to decide whether to remain captain after both teams' poor campaigns at the Twenty20 World Cup.

Tournament co-hosts Sri Lanka made the Super Eights but the 2014 champion lost all three matches to finish at the bottom of Group Two.

"I thought it was time to give it (the job) to someone else," Jayasuriya said after their narrow defeat to Pakistan on Saturday.

"That's why about two months ago I'd said during the England series that I don't have hopes of staying in the job for long. I'd taken this decision by then.

"I thought I'd be able to leave as coach on a good note in the World Cup. I wasn't able to do that as well as I'd like, and I'm sad about that."

The former captain, whose contract runs until June, said he was yet to convey his decision to Sri Lanka Cricket. "I haven't given SLC any news officially yet. They don't know that I am going to say this even. I will need to go and discuss with them."

It was an underwhelming tournament for Pakistan as well that



included a comprehensive defeat at the hands of arch-rivals India in a group match. Pakistan's middle order often did not click, while their slow bowlers could not make the most of the spin-friendly conditions in Sri Lanka where they played all their matches.

"We have underperformed in the whole tournament," captain Agha told reporters. "We are out of the semis due to our failure in decision-making in pressure situations." Agha said he and head coach Mike Hesson took full responsibility for their poor performance in a global multi-team event. He was unhappy with his own form but said he was not in a hurry to take a call on whether to stay as Pakistan's white-ball captain.

"I will go back and take some time to decide," the 32-year-old said. "Because at this point of time stepping down would be an emotional decision."

## FOCUS

## Pakistan's shortcomings exposed at lacklustre World Cup performance

AFP  
Kandy, Sri Lanka

Pakistan's shortcomings were laid bare during their lacklustre T20 World Cup campaign which ended Saturday when the team failed to reach the semi-finals.

From the captain Salman Agha, who was criticised for not being a T20 player, to slow batting rates and the use of all-rounders not up to the job, Pakistan were shown to be behind the times in the rapid-fire format.

Former wicketkeeper-batsman Kamran Akmal believes there is a huge gulf in standard between Pakistan and the top sides such as India, West Indies, South Africa and England.

"Other teams have evolved to the demands of Twenty20 cricket, but neither our team nor our players meet those standards," Akmal

told AFP. "It is like other teams are playing on the moon and we are on earth. We only beat smaller teams but lose to top teams."

Pakistan had high hopes for the T20 World Cup after sweeping Australia 3-0 in a pre-tournament series.

They boasted a quintet of spinners that should have been suited to the turning pitches in Sri Lanka where they played all their matches.

But they received a rude awakening in their first match against the Netherlands when only they squeezed home by three wickets in the final over thanks to Faheem Ashraf's 11-ball 29.

Like most of his predecessors at World Cups, Agha blundered in the pressure-cooker match against India, which only went ahead after the Pakistan government U-turned on a boycott just days before the encounter.

Agha won the toss and asked In-



Pakistan's captain Salman Agha reacts during the World Cup Super Eight match against Sri Lanka on Saturday. (AFP)

dia to bat. The decision backfired badly as Pakistan conceded 175 and were hammered by 61 runs.

Agha inexplicably held back his mystery spinner and chief weapon Usman Tariq to the 11th over, by

which time opener Ishan Kishan had scored his match-shaping 77 and India were well on their way to a winning total.

"How on earth did you bowl at a venue which was suited to batting first?" questioned former Pakistan player Basit Ali.

"After India scored 175 our batters failed to handle the pressure of a chase."

Agha also held back Tariq's second over in the game against England, after he took a wicket in his first, allowing captain Harry Brook to build a sparkling match-winning century.

## 'Weak captaincy from Agha'

"It was weak captaincy from Agha," said Akmal, who also took aim at the head coach Mike Hesson and the selectors.

"We were also not helped by head coach Mike Hesson, who has an obsession for bit-and-pieces all-rounders who were neither

complete bowlers, nor good batters." Pakistan's insistence in sticking with the out-of-sorts Barbar Azam did nothing to help their shaky batting.

The star batsman's slow scoring at number four interrupted the side's rhythm.

He was dropped for the final match against Sri Lanka on Saturday where Pakistan finally posted a total in excess of 200, but it proved too little too late as New Zealand progressed on net run rate.

"We are all fans of Azam but he disappointed us by not adapting to the demands of T20 cricket," said one Pakistan fan, Saud Baloch, who resigned from his job in the United Arab Emirates to go to the World Cup.

"The whole Pakistan fandom is not only disappointed but angry.

"But we know nothing will change and we will continue to mourn such defeats in future," he said.

QATAR DRAG RACING CHAMPIONSHIP

# Al-Hail, al-Rumaih emerge champions

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**O**n a charged Ramadan night of fierce competition and edge-of-your-seat finales, the fourth and penultimate round of the 2025-2026 Qatar Drag Race Championship roared to a close at the Qatar Racing Club speed track.

The round spanned three days: qualifying on the first two days and final eliminations on Friday, ending with the crowning of the top three winners in all eight categories.

The event is held under the patronage of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani.

In the INDEX 10.00 category, the final race featured a showdown between Abdulaziz al-Hail and Ahmed Hassan. Hassan had previously claimed the titles of the opening two rounds and was aiming for a third this season. Meanwhile, al-Hail was making his first appearance in a final race; however, that did not prevent him from cap-



turing his maiden championship title, leaving Hassan in second place.

The INDEX 9.00 category witnessed a completely new podium lineup this round, as Rameeh al-Rumaih secured his first title of the season with Bader al-Foudri finishing second.

In the INDEX 8.50 (Cars) category, Hamdan al-Kaabi celebrated his second consecutive victory, earning his second title of the season. This time, he triumphed over Hamad al-Ajmi in the final.

Over the eighth mile, the three

car categories delivered fierce battles. In INDEX 4.80, Mohammed al-Furaih reached his third straight final and claimed his first title, defeating Rashid al-Juhani, while round two winner Saeed al-Balushi finished third.

Al-Balushi returned to the podium once again - this time from the top step - after winning the INDEX 4.50 category title, marking his second triumph in this class. He secured victory over his brother Rashid, who faced him in the final race. Rashid, in turn, finished second for the second consecutive



round, while Ibrahim Abbas Ibrahim, champion of the previous two rounds, claimed third place.

Rashid al-Balushi made up for his earlier final defeat to his brother by winning the Super Street category final against Mohammed Ali Mohammed. This victory marked his third title in the category, following his wins in the first and second rounds.

**Al-Ansari claims two bike titles**

The INDEX 8.50 Bike class drew the round's largest field, with 30 riders battling through eliminations. In the final, Abdullah al-Ansari - winner of the opening two rounds - defeated Shihab Bourbaa once again to claim his third title of the season. Bourbaa took second, while Mohammed Ali finished third.

Al-Ansari then doubled his success in the Street Bike category, winning the final against Ghanem al-Dhaheeri. Abdulwahab Bouqmaz secured third place, marking his second podium finish of the season.

QRC General Manager Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani crowned the top three winners in each category.

MOTOGP

# Bezzecchi wins season opener as Marquez retires

Alex Marquez, last season's runner-up, did not finish the race

AFP  
Buriram, Thailand

**M**arco Bezzecchi won the MotoGP season-opening Grand Prix in Thailand from pole position yesterday as defending world champion Marc Marquez retired late with a buckled wheel.

Aprilia's Bezzecchi led from start to finish to top the podium in Buriram, with KTM's Pedro Acosta second and Trackhouse's Raul Fernandez third.

Ducati's Marquez is chasing a record-equalling eighth world title this season but he exited the race in dramatic fashion while in fourth place with five laps to go.

The Spaniard, who started from second on the grid, took a corner wide and the jolt to his bike dislodged the rear tyre and badly damaged his wheel.

Bezzecchi returned to winning form after crashing out of Saturday's sprint race on the second lap.

"Yesterday was a small mistake with a big consequence so it was important today to try to bounce back," said the Italian.

"My pace was good with the medium, we worked it super-well all weekend, so I knew that I could be fast if I was in front.

"I tried my all to make a good start and the bike was perfect," he added.

Bezzecchi was fastest in all three practice sessions in Thailand and set a new track record in qualifying.

It was also his third straight Grand Prix win stretching back to last season.

"It's just the first race so we must stay calm, we must stay focused, keep our head down and try to work always in the best way possible," said Bezzecchi.



Aprilia Racing's Marco Bezzecchi celebrates winning the MotoGP race on the podium with the trophy at the Thailand Grand Prix yesterday. (Reuters)

"Because we know that we will struggle at some point."

Marquez dominated last year's championship but he said earlier this week that he was still feeling the lingering effects of a shoulder injury that forced him to miss the final four races of the season.

The 33-year-old was picked off by a succession of riders as the race got underway but recovered to put himself back into podium contention.

He was priming himself for an attack on Acosta and Fernandez when he ran wide and did well not to be thrown from his bike, even though it did spell the end of his race.

The 33-year-old got off his bike and slapped his hands together in

frustration before trudging off the track.

His departure left Acosta to reel in Fernandez to secure second place and wrap up a successful weekend for the 21-year-old Spaniard.

Acosta won the sprint after Marquez was forced to let him pass on the final lap because of a penalty.

"We have to be happy that things are working super-good," said Acosta, who leads the championship standings ahead of Bezzecchi after the first round.

"Thanks to everyone who supported me, because last year the start was not the dreaming one."

Fernandez looked like he had second place locked up until a

late problem with his bike allowed Acosta to go past him. "It was quite difficult, especially the last five, six laps," said Fernandez. "I tried to make my maximum but I had destroyed the rear tyre."

Jorge Martin, the 2024 world champion, finished fourth after seeing the defence of his title wrecked by injury last season.

Trackhouse's Ai Ogura was fifth, followed by VR46's Fabio Di Giannantonio and KTM's Brad Binder.

Alex Marquez, last season's championship runner-up, did not finish the race after a late crash.

Francesco Bagnaia, the 2022 and 2023 world champion, finished ninth after starting from 13th on the grid.

FOOTBALL

# Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament is a platform to discover future stars: Al-Athba

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**he third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Football Tournament showcased exceptional organisation and spirited competition, attracting wide community attention in the Al-Thumama area.

Chairman of the Central Municipal Council, **Mohammed bin Ali Al-Athba**, praised the event, saying, "One of the tournament's main objectives was to discover and develop young football talents by providing them with an opportunity to showcase their skills to the public and those interested in sports. This contributes to supporting the development of Qatari football and supplying clubs with promising talents for the future."

He highlighted the tournament's growth in team participation, audience turnout, and match quality, noting the discipline and sportsmanship that strengthened bonds among the youth.

He also commended Hassan bin Ali al-Ishaq, Chairman of the Organizing Committee, for his leadership and meticulous management, which ensured a safe and successful event.

The Al-Thumama Championship, being held at Al Furjan Stadium in cooperation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation, is



featuring 13 teams in the 10-14 age group. Meanwhile, Yousef Abdunoor, Director of the tournament, confirmed its resounding success.

"The upcoming matches in both groups will witness fierce competition for first and second place, as all four teams in each group have a chance to qualify for the semi-finals. Therefore, the coming days will be filled with exciting matches that will be enjoyed by the fans and followers of the Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament," he said.

He added: "The Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament has gained significant and positive recognition among a large segment of the community. Despite its limited resources and modest support, it has firmly established itself among Ramadan tournaments."



BOTTOMLINE

# Takele wins Tokyo Marathon after sprint finish

AFP  
Tokyo

**E**thiopia's Tadesse Takele successfully defended his Tokyo Marathon title yesterday, edging Kenya's Geoffrey Toroitich in a sprint finish to cross the line in 2hr 3min 37sec.

Takele finished with the same official time as Toroitich after a dramatic battle for the line, with Kenya's Alexander Mutiso just one second further behind in third place.

"I knew that the final stage would be decisive," said the 23-year-old Takele.

"Around 41km I wanted to wait and see what

would happen and then I made my move right before the finish."

Kenya's Brigid Kosgei won the women's race in 2:14:29, a new course record.

Ethiopia's Berukan Welde was second in 2:16:36, followed by her countrywoman Hawi Feysa in 2:17:39.

In warm, dry conditions in the Japanese capital, a men's leading pack including Takele, Toroitich, Mutiso and Kenya's Daniel Mateiko broke away around the 37km mark.

Takele made a late move and managed to stay in front despite a last-gasp challenge from Toroitich.

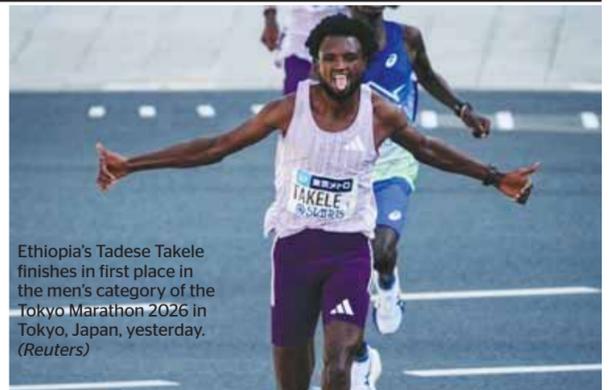
"Today's race was a great one," said Takele. "There was intense and positive competi-

tion, and I'm truly happy that I was able to win."

The men's field was weakened by the withdrawal through injury of Kenya's Timothy Kiplagat and Ethiopia's Milkesa Mengesha in the lead-up to the race. In the women's competition, Kosgei was in a class of her own and finished more than two minutes clear of her nearest rival. Kosgei, the Tokyo Marathon champion and Olympic silver medalist in 2021, has said she will compete for Turkey at the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

"We have a lot of athletes in Kenya," said Kosgei.

"I want some young generation to follow my step to join me in Turkey."



Ethiopia's Tadesse Takele finishes in first place in the men's category of the Tokyo Marathon 2026 in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday. (Reuters)

## SERIE A

# Milan consolidate top-four credentials with Cremonese win

'WE HAVE A HUGE GOAL TO REACH WITH TEAMS BEHIND US'

AFP  
Cremona, Italy

AC Milan moved closer to Champions League football next season after two late strikes gave them a 2-0 win at Cremonese yesterday.

Strahinja Pavlovic put Milan ahead in the 90th minute with his shoulder before Rafael Leao's simple finish in stoppage time gave the away side a result which flattered a drab display in Cremona.

Milan, who have been without European football this season, have little realistic hope of winning the Serie A title as the seven-time European champions are 10 points behind league leaders Inter Milan.

Next weekend's Milan derby has little more than local pride riding on it with Inter speeding off into the distance with 11 games remaining in the league campaign.

Milan's stated aim for the season, however, was qualification for the Champions League and Massimiliano Allegri's team are on course for that objective.

"We have a huge goal to reach with teams behind us who continue collecting points," said Allegri to DAZN.

"You have Como, Atalanta still have to play, Napoli won in the end and there are also Roma and Juventus. All we can do is take it one step at a time."

Fifth-placed Como are nine points behind Milan, while Roma,



AC Milan's Rafael Leao (right) celebrates with team-mate Christopher Nkunku after scoring a goal during the Serie A match against US Cremonese at the Giovanni Zini Stadium in Cremona, Italy, yesterday. (AFP)

seven points behind them in fourth, face Juventus in Sunday's headline fixture.

Atalanta are five points off the Champions League spots in seventh after falling to a surprise 2-1 defeat at 10-man Sassuolo, their

first in the league since the turn of the year.

Raffaele Palladino's team are the only Italian side in the last 16 of Europe's top club competition following their thrilling 4-3 aggregate triumph over Borussia

Dortmund on Wednesday.

Jamie Leweling grabbed a first-half brace and Deniz Undav scored again as Stuttgart cruised to a 4-0 home victory over Wolfsburg in the Bundesliga yesterday.

## BUNDESLIGA

# Leweling doubles up as Stuttgart sink sorry Wolfsburg

AFP  
Stuttgart

Jamie Leweling grabbed a first-half brace and Deniz Undav scored again as Stuttgart cruised to a 4-0 home victory over Wolfsburg in the Bundesliga yesterday.

Nikolas Nartey scored in stoppage time as the German Cup holders drew level with third-placed Hoffenheim on 46 points. Stuttgart are five points ahead of fifth-placed RB Leipzig, who play at Hamburg in Sunday's late game.

Leweling praised coach Sebastian Hoernes, who reached 100 Bundesliga games as Stuttgart manager.

"He developed me into the player I am today. He helped me a lot, gave me a lot of confidence," said Leweling.

"I think I've been repaying him with my performances - of course not always with two goals every game."

Wolfsburg, who haven't been relegated since promotion to the Bundesliga in 1997, have won just one of their last 10 games and now sit second bottom, three points from safety.

Stuttgart welcomed the

Wolves to south-western Germany fresh from beating Celtic 4-2 over two legs to reach the Europa League last 16, where they will face Porto.

Undav pounced on a poor clearance to put Stuttgart ahead with his 14th league goal after 21 minutes.

Chris Fuehrich found Leweling on the half-hour mark to double Stuttgart's lead and the Germany winger scored again just before half-time, volleying in from the right side of the box.

Stuttgart added a fourth late on as Nartey scored with the final kick of the match.

Goals from Fares Chaibi and Jean-Matteo Bahoya took Eintracht Frankfurt to a 2-0 home win over Freiburg, lifting the hosts past the visitors into seventh spot.

Chaibi snuck a low shot into the bottom corner with 64 minutes gone. With nine minutes remaining, the Algerian passed to Bahoya who guided the ball over Freiburg's Noah Atubolu and into the net.

Frankfurt have now nabbed seven points from four matches since Spaniard Albert Riera took over as manager, with their only loss coming at league leaders Bayern Munich.



Stuttgart's Jamie Leweling celebrates after scoring his team's second goal during the Bundesliga match against Wolfsburg in Stuttgart yesterday. (AFP)

## SEVILLA RESCUE DERBY DRAW TO DEAL BETIS TOP FOUR SETBACK

Sevilla came from two goals down to snatch a thrilling 2-2 derby draw against Real Betis yesterday in La Liga. Isaac Romero thumped home from outside the box in the 85th minute to salvage his side a point at Betis's temporary La Cartuja home.

The draw leaves Manuel Pellegrini's Betis fifth, eight points behind Atletico Madrid and Villarreal, in third and fourth respectively, hampering their hopes of Champions League qualification. Former Manchester United winger Antony sent the hosts ahead in the 16th minute with an acrobatic overhead kick after the ball fell for him in the box. Midfielder Alvaro Fidalgo tucked home the second before half-time when Ez Abde, who was also involved in the opener, played him in. Veteran Chile forward Alexis Sanchez pulled one back for Sevilla, 11th, after the hour mark with an angled header.

It set up an exciting finale and Romero finally got the goal Sevilla craved, drilling home from just outside the box to level.

Abde almost fired Betis back in front but struck the post with three minutes to go and Akor Adams had a shot cleared off the line at the other end. Earlier Elche grabbed a 2-2 draw against Espanyol in a match which was tarnished by an incident of alleged racism. Moroccan Espanyol



Sevilla's Isaac Romero celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the La Liga match against Real Betis at Benito Villamar Stadium in Seville yesterday. (AFP)

defender Omar El Hilali accused Elche forward Rafa Mir of telling him that he "came here on a dinghy", according to the referee's report. Largie Ramazani earned Valencia a 1-0 win over Osasuna from the penalty spot to help them climb to 14th, five points above the relegation zone.

On Saturday, Julian Alvarez struck in the 94th minute to snatch Atletico Madrid a 1-0 La Liga win over bottom side Real Oviedo and help his team climb to third.

The Argentine striker secured Diego Simeone's side only their second win in five league games with his first league goal in nearly four months. The Rojiblancos had an eye on Tuesday's Copa del Rey semi-final second leg at Barcelona on Tuesday, where they hold a 4-0 advantage, and were extremely fortunate to emerge with three points.

After La Liga leaders Barcelona beat Villarreal, fourth, 4-1 earlier on, Atletico capitalised to pull level with the Yellow Submarine on 51 points.

"They are fighting for their lives, they played a great game, it was a good game for the fans, a very open game," Atletico defender Robin Le Normand told Movistar.

"We knew how to hold on and then with the quality we have up front, we got the goal."

Atletico started well in the opening minutes but faded and Oviedo created the greater danger in the first half, with Atletico stopper Jan Oblak saving well from Ilyas Chaira and Alberto Reina. The Slovenia goalkeeper denied Federico Vinas in the second half, with Atletico improving in the final stages and taking control.

## Hearts the winners as Celtic fight back to salvage Rangers draw

Celtic came from 2-0 down to salvage a 2-2 draw at fierce rivals Rangers yesterday in a result that edged Hearts ever closer to breaking the Old Firm's dominance of Scottish football.

A spectacular overhead kick from Youssef Chermitt fired Rangers into an early lead at a buoyant Ibrox and the Portuguese under-21 international doubled the home side's advantage before half-time. Celtic have made a habit of late comebacks during Martin O'Neill's two caretaker spells in charge this season and needed another one to salvage their title hopes. Kieran Tierney's header halved the deficit before Reo Hatate grabbed a stoppage-time equaliser on the rebound after his penalty was saved by Jack Butland. Yet the winners of a pulsating Glasgow derby were in Edinburgh as Hearts' lead at the top was reduced only to six points with nine games to play for the top two. Celtic trail second-placed Rangers by two points, but can usurp them with a game in hand at Aberdeen on Wednesday.

"I think today's result - if you belong to Hearts - then you'll think it's a great result for them," said O'Neill on his 74th birthday.

"But even so, we're not out of it. If the game had ended at half-time, with our performance, we'd have thought we're a million miles off it."

Legendary former Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson was in attendance at Ibrox after taking in Hearts' 1-0 win over Aberdeen at Tynecastle on Saturday. Ferguson was in charge of Aberdeen the last time a side other than Celtic or Rangers won the Scottish top flight back in 1984/85. The flaws on both sides of the Glasgow divide that has allowed Hearts to profit were on show.

## BOTTOMLINE

# Paris Saint-Germain win to extend lead over Lens at top of Ligue 1

AFP  
Le Havre, France

Bradley Barcola scored and Desire Doue had a penalty saved as Paris Saint-Germain held on for a 1-0 win away to Le Havre on Saturday to extend their lead at the top of the Ligue 1 table to four points.

PSG were looking to take advantage of another slip-up by title rivals Lens, who were held to a 1-1 draw away at Strasbourg on Friday to go two games without a win.

Luis Enrique's side duly got the job done with Barcola heading in from a Lee Kang-in cross on 37 minutes for his ninth goal of the season.

It was not a full-strength PSG, with Ousmane Dembele again out injured along with Fabian Ruiz and Joao Neves, while skipper Marquinhos was among the players rested.

Doue came off the bench in the second half and won a penalty with just over 10 minutes remaining, but his kick was kept out by Le Havre goalkeeper Mory Diaw diving to his right -- PSG have con-

verted only five of their 10 spot-kicks this season.

Diaw also produced a fine reaction save from Nuno Mendes while PSG goalkeeper Matfei Safonov made a key stop to deny Issa Soumare at the other end.

"There are no nice and easy games for PSG because every match is important. We need to get players back and improve because we have less confidence than usual at the moment," said Luis Enrique.

The reigning European champions are gearing up for a Champions League last-16 tie against Chelsea and have now won nine out of 10 Ligue 1 games played since the start of December.

"It is the first time we have had a four-point gap at the top so this is a time for us to be happy. It was important to get the win here," added the coach.

Elsewhere in France on Saturday, Rennes made it two wins out of two under new coach Franck Haise as they beat Toulouse 1-0 in Brittany thanks to Arnaud Nordin's first-half goal.

Monaco got back on track after losing to PSG in their Champions League play-off tie as USA star

Folarin Balogun and Simon Adingra scored in a 2-0 win over Angers.

Balogun, who is expected to be a key player for the United States at the World Cup, now has 12 goals this season in all competitions, including four in his last four games.

Marseille in fourth play host to third-placed Lyon Sunday in a key game in the fight for Champions League qualification.

Pablo Longoria left his position as Marseille president on Saturday evening, the Spaniard departing after five years to be replaced on an interim basis by Alban Juster.

Longoria's departure comes amid a period of turbulence at the 1993 European champions, who saw coach Roberto De Zerbi leave just under three weeks ago in the wake of a 5-0 defeat away to PSG and their elimination from the Champions League.

De Zerbi has been replaced in the dugout by Habib Beye. Director of football Medhi Benatia recently announced he was stepping down before it was confirmed he would stay on until the end of the season at the club owned by US tycoon Frank McCourt.



PSG's Bradley Barcola celebrates scoring their first goal against Le Havre in the Ligue 1 match. (Reuters)