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'Superman Sanju' toast of India after T20 World Cup heroics



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New rules, same old suspects as F1 revs up for 2026 season

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SPOTLIGHT

Decision on Middle Eastern F1 races to be guided by safety, says FIA head

Reuters
Melbourne

Formula One is keeping a close eye on the situation in the Middle East and any decision on races scheduled for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia next month will be guided by safety, the sport and governing body FIA said.

Australian Grand Prix chief executive Travis Auld expected there to be no impact on this weekend's season-opener at Melbourne's Albert Park from travel issues caused by conflict in the Gulf region. US and Israeli bombing of Iran at the weekend was followed by retaliatory strikes on Gulf States with the result that all activity in one of the world's main aviation hubs has ceased. Formula One teams recently completed pre-season testing in the Gulf State of Bahrain and many personnel were scheduled to pass through Qatar or the United Arab Emirates on their journey to Australia for Sunday's race.

"No doubts the events of the weekend have thrown out the travel plans for the teams and F1 themselves," Auld said. "F1 are experts at moving people around the world and so they've quickly rescheduled flights. I'm told, everyone's now locked in and arriving within the required timeframes, and so there'll be no impact on our race."

The season-opener will be followed in March by races in China and Japan before the first of the Gulf races on the Formula One calendar in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in April. Qatar and Abu Dhabi are the season-enders in November and December.

Mohammed Ben Sulayem, the Emirati who heads the governing International Automobile Federation (FIA), said in a statement his thoughts were with all those affected. "We are in close contact with our



Formula One teams recently completed pre-season testing in the Gulf State of Bahrain and many personnel were scheduled to pass through Qatar or the United Arab Emirates on their journey to Australia for Sunday's race in Melbourne.

member clubs, championship promoters, teams, and colleagues on the ground as we monitor developments carefully and responsibly," he added. "Safety and wellbeing will guide our decisions as we assess the forthcoming events scheduled there for the FIA World Endurance Championship and the FIA Formula One world championship."

Formula One said separately it was closely monitoring the situation. Auld said that the nature of the Albert Park venue made it unlikely that Melbourne would be able to step in and stage another race if the conflict meant Bahrain or Saudi Arabia were unable

to host their rounds.

"Obviously, we spent a lot of time constructing this circuit, and straight after the race, we pull it all back down again so the community can use it," he said. "They'll have other plans in place, as you would imagine, for a whole series of reasons."

The Middle Eastern races are significant contributors to Formula One's revenues through hosting fees worth many tens of millions of dollars but Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar also have deep ties to the sport. Bahrain's sovereign wealth fund owns McLaren Racing while Abu

Dhabi controls the sportscar company. Qatar has a significant investment in F1 newcomers Audi.

Saudi energy giant Aramco is a global partner of the sport and title sponsor of the Aston Martin team. Formula One ran races without spectators during the COVID-19 pandemic and also has a list of circuits that might be able to step in at short notice, should that be required.

In 2022 the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix went ahead despite rocket attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis on an oil facility near the Jeddah street circuit.

Global Champions Tour Doha leg postponed

Doha: The Organising Committee of the Doha Equestrian Tour has announced the postponement of the Longines Global Champions Tour event scheduled to take place from March 4 to 7, citing current developments and the evolving situation in the region. Organisers confirmed that event is currently expected to resume from March 11.

In a statement, the Organising Committee of the Doha Equestrian Tour said: "At this stage, the Doha Equestrian Tour programme is scheduled to resume from March 11, and any further updates regarding the postponed event and remaining competitions will be communicated in the coming days. The safety and well-being of horses, athletes, teams, partners, staff and spectators remain the highest priority."

The Longines Global Champions Tour also confirmed the decision in a separate statement, saying: "The Longines Global Champions Tour and the Doha Equestrian Tour confirm that the Doha event scheduled to take place from March 4 to 7 will not proceed on these dates due to the current situation in the region. This decision has been made following careful assessment of airspace restrictions, participation travel timelines and overall operational limitations."

It added that further updates regarding the remaining events will be communicated in the coming days, while reaffirming that both the Longines Global Champions Tour and the Doha Equestrian Tour remain fully committed to their long-term partnership at Al Shaqab.

FOOTBALL

2026 World Cup tickets: Huge demand and sky-high prices

Cheapest tickets for the final in New Jersey will cost \$2,000 and the best seats is priced at \$8,680

AFP
Washington

From almost \$900 for the opening game to over \$8,000 for the final, match tickets are far from cheap for the World Cup which begins in North America in 100 days. *AFP Sport* assesses the cost of attending games at the tournament.

HOW MANY TICKETS, HOW MUCH DEMAND?

According to world football's governing body FIFA, almost 7mn tickets have been made available in total. Each person can buy a maximum of four tickets per match and a total of 40 for the whole competition. Around 2mn tickets were sold during an initial lottery in October. A second sales phase in December and January was also a lottery and attracted a record 508mn requests, according to FIFA.

It has not said how many tickets have been attributed but the matches in highest demand were the Group K finale between Colombia and Portugal in Miami on June 27, co-hosts Mexico against South Korea in Guadalajara on June 18, and the final at the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey on July 19.

PRICES SKYROCKET

There will be a total of 104 matches played at this expanded World Cup, the first ever to feature 48 teams, and ticket prices have soared for the most in-demand games. Fan group Football Supporters Europe said the North American bid had initially promised tickets would be available from as little as \$21, but instead the cheapest tickets to go on sale have been for \$60, for example for the Group J opener between Austria and



SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California will host eight World Cup matches, including United States' opener against Paraguay.

Jordan at the Levi's Stadium in California.

Most tickets cost at least \$200 for matches involving leading nations, while the cheapest tickets for the final cost \$2,000 and the best seats \$8,680 - that is before taking into account FIFA's official resale site, where one category three seat for the game at the MetLife Stadium on July 19 was being advertised for an eye-watering \$143,750, over 41 times its original face value of \$3,450.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino insists ticket prices are simply a consequence of the huge demand.

"In the US in particular there is this

thing called dynamic pricing, meaning the prices will go up or down", depending on the match in question, he said.

Having faced sustained criticism over prices, FIFA announced a cheaper category of tickets, but those seats available for \$60 were reserved for fans of qualified teams and would make up just 10 percent of each national federation's allotment.

FIFA has also put on sale packages combining match tickets with access to VIP lounges. For France against Senegal in New Jersey on June 16, those packages cost between \$2,900 and \$4,500.

FIFA is keeping aside an unspecified

US attacks do not augur well for World Cup, says Iran football chief

Tehran: Iran's football chief Mehdi Taj said US and Israeli attacks on the country did not augur well for this year's World Cup in North America and senior government officials would evaluate the situation before deciding if any action should be taken.

The US and Israel launched air strikes on Iran at the weekend, killing the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, with Iran due to play in the World Cup being hosted by the US, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19.

While there was no suggestion Iran might boycott the finals, Iran Football Federation President Taj told a panel discussion on Iran's *IRIB Channel 3* that

the attacks would have an impact. "It's not possible to say exactly, but there will certainly be a response," Taj said.

"This will surely be studied by the country's high-ranking sports officials and there will be a decision on what's going to happen. But what we can say now is that due to this attack and its viciousness, it is far from our expectations that we can look at the World Cup with hope."

Iran booked a place at their fourth successive finals last year by topping Group A in the third round of Asian qualifying. They are in Group G with Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand, with their matches taking place in Los Angeles and Seattle.

number of tickets which it will make available from April until the end of the tournament "on a first come, first served basis".

Then there are the resale platforms, including FIFA's own official site. But this controversial fan-to-fan market allows resellers to determine prices themselves, hence the huge price advertised for a final ticket.

The resale market is unregulated in the United States and Canada. In Mexico, reselling a ticket above face value is prohibited, but only when the ticket is purchased in Mexico using the local currency.

A "category three" seat - the highest section of the stands - for the tournament's opening game between Mexico and South Africa at Mexico City's Azteca Stadium on June 11 was recently listed at \$5,324, compared to an original price of \$895. Other sites such as SeatGeek and

StubHub were selling tickets at slightly lower prices.

EXTRA COSTS

It is not just the ticket prices that travelling supporters need to consider. The price of parking is also through the roof at many World Cup stadiums, which are often situated well away from the downtown areas of host cities. A space in a parking lot for a group game in Atlanta costs \$100, while the price is \$300 in Los Angeles.

An alternative for visiting fans who do not have match tickets is to go to one of the Fan Festivals in and around the 16 host cities. The Fan Fest in Kansas City will be able to welcome up to 25,000 people.

In New York, the US Open tennis venue at Flushing Meadows will be transformed into a fan zone holding up to 10,000 paying visitors, albeit only from June 17 to 28.

SPOTLIGHT

'Superman Sanju' toast of India after win

AFP
Kolkata

India yesterday hailed **Sanju Samson** as a "game-changer" after the opener's batting masterclass in Kolkata took the defending champions into the T20 World Cup semi-finals.

Samson's unbeaten 97 led India's chase of 196 against the West Indies in the last Super Eights match to set up a semi-final against England in Mumbai on Thursday.

Samson paced his innings to perfection and had more than a billion India fans erupting in joy on Sunday night when he hit Romario Shepherd for a six and four to complete the chase at Eden Gardens. "Handling the final overs well in both innings gave us the edge," India's batting great Sachin Tendulkar wrote on X.

"Sanju Samson's calm presence at the crease was wonderful to watch. That kind of presence lifts a side. Brilliant effort from everyone. On to the semi-finals!"

Former India batsman Mohammad Kaif said: "Sanju Samson the man for India in a do-or-die game. Focus is never on him but he proves to be the game-changer."

The 31-year-old Samson has been in and out of the Indian team and played just one group match

against Namibia in the absence of opener Abhishek Sharma.

India brought back Samson in their Super Eights match against Zimbabwe to break up the all-rounder opening partnership of Abhishek and Ishan Kishan.

India's media were lavish in their praise for Samson, who saved India from a humiliating early tournament exit on home soil.

"Superman Sanju rescues India," blazed the *Times of India*.

India coach Gautam Gambhir called Samson "world-class".

"We all know how good a player Sanju is and it was all about backing him," Gambhir told reporters.

"Today was a day where he probably showed his true potential."

Veteran spinner Harbhajan Singh also hailed Samson, saying it has made all of us proud. He also highlighted India's ace seamer Jasprit Bumrah's crucial breakthroughs.

In an X post, Harbhajan Singh wrote, "Today @IamSanjuSamson has made all of us proud. Critical breakthroughs by @JaspritBumrah93 also helped Team India. Congratulations #MenInBlue for the wonderful win. Our hearts stopped several times throughout the match, but all is well that ends well. Happy for #TeamIndia. Best wishes for the ultimate one!"

Former Indian all-rounder Irfan

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Pathan termed Samson's gritty 97* as the best innings of his career and highlighted his maturity throughout the innings.

"The best innings of his career, considering the match situation. The maturity he showed throughout was outstanding. A top-class,

match-winning knock from Sanju Samson," Irfan Pathan wrote in an X post. Former Indian opener Shikhar Dhawan heaped praises on

Samson's masterclass fifty, saying he stepped up when it mattered most. "@IamSanjuSamson stepped up when it mattered most. Highest score by an Indian in a T20 WC run chase, brilliant effort with the bat, supported by @IamShivamDube's cameo, and the bowlers led by @JaspritBumrah93 doing the hard work early. Semi-finals, here we come," Dhawan wrote in an X post.

Former Indian star Suresh Raina hailed India's clinical performance and labelled Samson's innings as 'pure dominance'.

"Well played, boys! Clinical performance, unstoppable spirit, and a true champion's mindset on display. One step closer to glory - let's bring it home! Pure dominance from @IamSanjuSamson," Raina wrote in an X post.

West Indies veteran seamer Ian Bishop also lauded Samson's innings, "Respect the name: Sanju Samson!!!" he said according to a report in *sports.ndtv.com*.

Samson, who made his debut in 2015, has played just 60 Twenty20 matches for India since.

"I always say, good things happen to good people who wait, who have a lot of patience," said India captain Suryakumar Yadav. South Africa face New Zealand in the first semi-final tomorrow in Kolkata.

The final is in Ahmedabad on Sunday.

PREVIEW

South Africa juggernaut faces knockout test

NEW ZEALAND IN THE WAY FOR THE IMPRESSIVE PROTEAS



South Africa's Aiden Markram celebrates with team-mates after taking the wicket of India's Ishan Kishan, caught out by Ryan Rickelton in Ahmedabad on February 22, 2026. (Reuters)

Reuters
Chennai

South Africa have hardly put a foot wrong in their march to the Twenty20 World Cup semi-finals, but complacency can have no place against a New Zealand side famed for punching above their weight when the teams meet at Eden Gardens tomorrow.

The Proteas are the tournament's only unbeaten side and look a far more rounded T20 unit than the one that fell at the last hurdle in 2024. They beat New Zealand in the group stage and have earned the favourites' tag that rested with defending champions India before the start of the tournament.

India face England in the other semi-final on Thursday.

"I'm glad that we're favourites, because I've always felt that as a South African team you want to be able to play as a favourite," head coach Shukri Conrad said, suggesting they were enjoying the spotlight.

Since surviving a double Super Over against Afghanistan, Aiden Markram's side have not taken their foot off the pedal.

In Quinton de Kock, Markram and Ryan Rickelton, they field a top order capable of



New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner

banking a powerplay header-off-start, with an explosive middle order offering little respite when the openers do not fire.

South Africa complement it with a varied bowling attack.

Kagiso Rabada's hard, Test-match lengths and Marco Jansen's left-arm bounce have cramped batters, while Lungi Ngidi's change-ups have been a revelation across phases.

Left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj provides control if conditions grip, with Markram holding himself back for match-ups.

South Africa have looked ominous so far but the knockout stage brings its own challenge. Besides, New Zealand can be a tricky opponent.

New Zealand opener Finn Allen's ultra aggression is often the powerplay disruptor alongside a rotating partner - Devon Conway or Tim Seifert.

All-rounder Rachin Ravindra's ability to change gears sets a platform for Glenn Phillips and Daryl Mitchell to attack the back end.

Their pace attack does not have a settled look though.

The Black Caps are likely to miss the services of fast bowler Matt Henry, who is back home on paternity leave. Jacob Duffy or Kyle Jamieson could replace him.

Their spin unit looks well covered however. Captain Mitchell Santner's stump-to-stump trajectory is a key match-up against de Kock and Markram, and Ish Sodhi's leg-spin could trouble South Africa's right-hand middle.

"We faced them in Ahmedabad, which I think is a venue that they've grown pretty used to given that they've spent a fair bit of time there," New Zealand's head coach Rob Walter said.

"The semi-finals will be in a different venue. It will provide a different challenge."

COMMENT

India coach Gambhir hails Samson's match-winning knock

Reuters
Kolkata

Sanju Samson delivered under pressure when it mattered most, coach Gautam Gambhir said, praising the wicket-keeper batter for his pivotal role in securing India's semi-final spot in the Twenty20 World Cup.

Samson's unbeaten knock of 97 guided India to a crucial chase of 196 against the West Indies, sealing victory with four balls to spare in a must-win game on Sunday.

"He's a world-class player, we all know how good a player Sanju is," Gambhir told reporters after the game.

"It was all about backing him. When the team needed him the most - obviously today was the day - he showed his full potential."

Following early dismissals of Abhishek Sharma and Ishan Kishan, Samson steadied India's innings against the Caribbean attack.

He registered the highest individual score by an Indian in a T20 World Cup chase, surpassing Virat Kohli's knocks of 82 against Australia and Pakistan.

"I actually felt that he never accelerated the innings. It was just very normal cricketing shots and I never saw him muscling the ball as well. That is the kind of talent he has," Gambhir said.

FOCUS

Alyssa thanks fans after blasting 158 in last ODI

AFP
Sydney

Retiring Australia captain Alyssa Healy thanked fans after slamming 158 against India in a fairytale goodbye to the one-day game.

The 35-year-old wicketkeeper-batter announced in January she was quitting all forms of cricket with the three-match series against India her last in the 50-over format after a storied 16-year career.

She will bid a final farewell in a one-off Test against India starting in Perth on Friday.

Demonstrating that she clearly still has what it takes, Healy crunched 158 off 98 balls in Hobart on Sunday to steer Australia to a bumper 185-run victory and seal the series 3-0.

It was the highest individual score by an Australian woman in ODIs on home soil.

Beth Mooney chipped in with an unbeaten 106.

"What a ridiculous sport that we play, that it can kick you down so many times and then give you op-

portunities like it has today," Healy told reporters after the game.

"I've hated every milestone match, so this was just an opportunity to go out and enjoy it," she said.

"It was one of the more enjoyable experiences I've had, so thanks to fans for that, it was a nice way to sign off in the yellow (kit)."

It drew the curtain on a 126-match career that began in 2010, with Healy making 3,777 runs and eight centuries.

Afghanistan's cricket team will tour India in June this year to play one Test and a three-match one-day international series, the Indian board said yesterday.

The tour will open with the Test in New Chandigarh on June 6, followed by three ODIs on June 14 (Dharamshala), June 17 (Lucknow) and June 20 (Chennai), said Devajit Saikia, secretary of the Board of Control for Cricket in India, in a news release.

Afghanistan's tour starts soon after this year's Indian Premier League (IPL) ends on May 31.

PREVIEW

New rules, same old suspects as F1 revs up for 2026 season

THE 24-RACE SEASON EXPLODES INTO ACTION IN MELBOURNE ON MARCH 8



People walk through a Williams F1 team fan zone in Melbourne's central business district, ahead of the season-opening Australian Formula One Grand Prix. (AFP)

SCHEDULE

March 8	Australian GP (Melbourne)
March 15	Chinese GP (Shanghai) – Sprint
March 29	Japanese GP (Suzuka)
April 12	Bahrain GP (Sakhir)
April 19	Saudi Arabian GP (Jeddah)
May 3	Miami GP (Miami) – Sprint
May 24	Canadian GP (Montreal) – Sprint
June 7	Monaco GP (Monte Carlo)
June 14	Barcelona-Catalunya GP (Barcelona)
June 28	Austrian GP (Spielberg)
July 5	British GP (Silverstone) – Sprint
July 19	Belgian GP (Spa-Francorchamps)
July 26	Hungarian GP (Budapest)
August 23	Dutch GP (Zandvoort) – Sprint
September 6	Italian GP (Monza)
September 13	Spanish GP (Madrid) – Inaugural Race
September 26	Azerbaijan GP (Baku) – Saturday Race
October 11	Singapore GP (Marina Bay) – Sprint
October 25	United States GP (Austin)
November 1	Mexico City GP (Mexico City)
November 8	São Paulo GP (Interlagos)
November 21	Las Vegas GP (Las Vegas) – Saturday Race
November 29	Qatar GP (Lusail)
December 6	Abu Dhabi GP (Yas Marina)

AFP
Paris, France

The start of any Formula One season is a game of smoke and mirrors: this one, which gets underway in Melbourne on March 8, has the added intrigue of sweeping changes that could shake up the established order.

For all the pre-season testing, the finger-pointing, the accusations of 'sandbagging' and loopholes in the new regulations, the guessing games have left us nowhere closer to predicting how the 24-race 2026 season will pan out.

Beyond the obvious, of course: the champion will come from one of four teams, the usual suspects of McLaren, Mercedes, Red Bull and Ferrari.

And that is no disrespect to the other seven teams including newcomers Cadillac and Audi.

The major overhaul to chassis and power units, designed to create more overtaking opportunities and improve the sport's eco-sustainability, have dominated the pre-season testing.

So the smoke will only begin to lift on the true force of each car when they take to the track at Albert Park.

Only then will we get an idea of whether McLaren's Lando Norris will be in pole position to retain the world title he won so dramatically from Max Verstappen last season.

The pit lane talk has been hanging the favourite's tag around the neck of George Russell as Mercedes are rumoured to have made the best of the rule changes.

That may depend, however, on whether they have indeed exploited a loophole in the new rules, as many are claiming, which could give them as much as 0.3 seconds per lap over their rivals.

In sport of fine margins, that is a gaping chasm.

When Verstappen grumbled publicly about the new cars in Bahrain, describing them as "Formula E on steroids" and "anti-



Defending champion Lando Norris

racing", Russell leapt to their defence.

"The guiding principles are still very much the same," said the Briton.

"You're pushing the car to the absolute limit.

"You're trying to brake as hard as possible and as late as possible, and carry as much speed through the corners."

'Reliable' Red Bull

The Russell-Verstappen dynamic is certainly one to watch.

The pair have had a number of spats going back to the Azerbaijan sprint in 2022. It picked up in 2024 with Russell accusing Verstappen of being a bully and the Dutchman

describing Russell as a "backstabber".

For these last four years the Mercedes was not a match on track for Verstappen's Red Bull but if that changes this year then the rivalry could reignite.

Questions remain about the efficiency and reliability of the new Red Bull engine which is the first that the team has developed and built itself, with some input from Ford.

Having said that, the four-time world champion's father Jos Verstappen, who is not renowned for holding back, called it "promising".

"I am satisfied with what is happening, especially when we



Lewis Hamilton



Charles Leclerc



George Russell



Max Verstappen

look at the engine," he said. "It is powerful and reliable. During the first race, we will see where it really stands."

Russell and Verstappen will also face stiff competition from their young teammates, 19-year-old Kimi Antonelli and 21-year-old Isack Hadjar.

"If the car is capable of winning, then I will win races," the ambitious Hadjar, promoted from Racing Bulls, told AFP.

If the Mercedes engine has capitalised on a loophole, which will be closed mid-season, then it should also assist Norris and his teammate Oscar Piastri whose

McLarens use the same power units.

"The biggest challenge at the minute is battery management and knowing how to utilise that in the best way," said Norris.

"You have a very powerful battery that doesn't last very long, so (it's) knowing when to use it, how much energy and power you use, and how to split that across the lap."

Ferrari are the last of the Big Four and after some pretty thin years they will be looking to Charles Leclerc and Lewis Hamilton to do more than make up the numbers.

Hamilton is 41 now and suffered a miserable debut season with the Italians last year when he failed to make a single Grand Prix podium.

His body language suggested he might be on the verge of quitting but the new regulations appear to have given him a new energy to chase that record eighth world championship title once more.

"I'm re-set and refreshed," he posted on social media after pre-season testing.

"I'm not going anywhere, so stick with me. For a moment, I forgot who I was but... you're not going to see that mindset again."

"I know what needs to be done. This is going to be one hell of a season."

SPOTLIGHT

Tennis players remain holed up in Dubai after Iranian strikes leave entire region unsettled

AFP
Paris, France

A "small number" of tennis players remain stuck in Dubai following a men's tournament last week, owing to the war in the Middle East, the tour's governing body the ATP said yesterday.

Russian Daniil Medvedev, who won the singles title on Saturday, is among those who have been unable to leave the city because of the attacks from Iranian missiles and drones.

"The health, safety and well-being of our players, staff and tournament personnel is our priority," the ATP said in a statement published on X, formerly Twitter.

"We can confirm that a small number of players and team members remain in Dubai... They are being accommodated in the official tournament hotels. We are in direct communication with those affected."

Finnish player Harri Heliövaara, who won the doubles alongside British player Henry Patten, wrote on his blog on Sunday "much

of the airspace in the surrounding areas is closed" in response to the Iranian strikes.

The Finn estimated that around 30 people in total were being housed in a hotel close to the airport. "We're just calmly waiting for things to improve," he added. "Of course we want to leave as soon as possible, but sometimes the best thing is just to wait."

The players were offered a glimmer of hope when Dubai Airports announced "limited" flights would resume soon.

Emirates and low-cost carrier flydubai both said they would resume some flights Monday evening.

Ethihad Airways, which operates flights from Abu Dhabi, said it would resume operations today.

"Up till now the ATP's instructions were very clear: stay in the hotel and wait," said Heliövaara on his blog.

The 36-year-old, who has won Wimbledon (2024) and the Australian Open (2025) doubles titles, said going by road, to either Oman or Saudi Arabia, was impractical.

Targeted since Saturday by American and Israeli strikes, Iran has responded by send-

ing drones and missiles toward several countries in the region, including the United Arab Emirates. Despite the numerous explosions heard since the beginning of the war in Dubai, the doubles final was played on Saturday and the trophy ceremony went ahead for the singles event.

The Dubai ATP 500 was the last in a series of tournaments on the men's and women's tours before they shift to California on Wednesday for the Masters and WTA 1000 in Indian Wells.

Challenger tournaments, on the second tier of the professional circuit, are still scheduled to be held in Fujairah, in the northeast of the Emirates.

The ATP responded to AFP's enquiry about the two successive Challenger tournaments - March 2-8, March 9-15 - by directing it to their tweet which gave no indication of their status.

However, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) told AFP the two World Tennis Tour tournaments, third-tier events set for March 16-28 at Fujairah, in the north east of the Emirates, had been "postponed".

Kenya suspends 27 athletes for doping violations

Nairobi: Disgraced Kenyan marathon runner Rita Jeptoo, national 400m hurdles champion Wiseman Were, and 25 other athletes have been provisionally suspended for doping violations, the country's anti-doping agency announced yesterday.

Jeptoo, 45, a former Boston and Chicago Marathon winner, was banned for four years in 2014 after testing positive for a banned substance, and only returned to racing three years ago.

She has now been suspended again following a test that found the presence of prohibited anabolic androgenic steroids, the national anti-doping body (ADAK) said. She will remain suspended until her hearing, but ADAK did not say when that would take place. ADAK said Were, 28, a Commonwealth 4x400m relay bronze medalist, had been suspended for missing three tests since August 2025.

His ban runs from February 14 and he will be unable to compete until

his case is heard. It is not clear when that may be.

LIST INCLUDES FOOTBALL AND BASKETBALL PLAYERS

The list also includes football and basketball players who have been provisionally suspended for varying doping offences.

More than 140 Kenyan athletes, mainly long-distance runners, have been suspended by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) since 2017 - more than any other nation.

Among them are figures including the current women's marathon world record holder Ruth Chepngetich - provisionally suspended in July by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) after testing positive for a diuretic - and Benard Kibet Koeh, fifth in the 10,000m at the Paris Olympics, who was suspended in June by the AIU. The current suspensions come after ADAK was removed from the World Anti-Doping Agency non-compliance watch list after meeting the required standards.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Rosenior warns Chelsea players over discipline

Neto is the seventh Chelsea player to be shown a red card

AFP
London

Liam Rosenior demanded improvement in discipline from his Chelsea players after Pedro Neto became their ninth player to be sent off this season, threatening to drop players who do not show greater control.

Sunday's 2-1 loss to Premier League leaders Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium means Chelsea have won just two of their past six matches in all competitions. They are sixth in the Premier League table ahead of tomorrow's match at fourth-placed Aston Villa, three points behind Liverpool in the battle for Champions League football next season.

Ill-discipline has been costly for Chelsea this season, with Neto the seventh Stamford Bridge player to be shown a red card in the Premier League. Chelsea boss Rosenior, who replaced Enzo Maresca in the hot seat in January, said Neto had apologised to his teammates after he was dismissed in the 70th minute.

"My job is to create a culture of accountability, where if you make a mistake, it's OK, you hold your hands up and you make sure it doesn't happen again," said the English manager. "But you have to hold your hands up to the original mistake. If I make the wrong team selection, or I get something wrong, my job is to be accountable, and it's the same for my players in that moment."

Rosenior said Portugal winger Pedro, who will miss this week's match at Villa Park, had apologised to his teammates. "I just need to see an improvement in the behaviour now," he said. "And it's not just Pedro. We've had bookings. People speak about dissent. We've had needless bookings in terms of fouls. If we are to improve and get to where we want to be, we have to make a conscious step now to make sure it doesn't happen again."

The Chelsea boss said there were different approaches to tackling the issue. "Sometimes it's not a stick, it's showing what the value of not having a red card is," he said. "If you look at our stats, when we have 11 men on the pitch, before my job here and after my job here, our percentage chance of winning goes through the roof. So that needs to be motivation in itself, to make sure we stay disciplined in key moments, reacting to setbacks. Sometimes a setback is giving the ball away, sometimes



Chelsea's Pedro Neto reacts after being shown a red card as manager Liam Rosenior looks during the Premier League match against Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium in London. (Reuters)

a setback is a referee making a decision you disagree with.

"In that moment you have to react positively and you have to think of the next thing. Those are the things we have to go after in order for our discipline to improve."

Rosenior added: "You pick players who are showing that improvement. I can't afford to go through a season every two games or every three games with a red card, it's just not possible. So I need to see improvement in that and I need to adjust my team selection based on who's showing those capabilities."

Rosenior believes his spell at Stamford Bridge can end the club's turbulent period if he is given time to make his mark. Rosenior became Chelsea's fifth permanent manager under current owners BlueCo when he arrived

from Strasbourg to replace Maresca in January. Including caretakers, the 41-year-old is the ninth boss to have held the job in the six years that Mikel Arteta has managed Premier League leaders Arsenal.

There has also been a significant turnover of players and personnel during that time. Of the Chelsea squad that won the Champions League in 2021, only Reece James remained by September of last year.

Thomas Tuchel, who managed Chelsea to that Champions League final success against Manchester City, was dismissed four months after the new owners took control. Graham Potter and Mauricio Pochettino also had short-lived reigns at Chelsea before Maresca's 18 months in the job ended abruptly on New Year's Day following a falling out with the hierarchy.

COPA DEL REY

Barcelona must 'make the impossible possible': Coach Flick

AFP
Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick insisted his team could turn around a 4-0 deficit in the Copa del Rey semi-final tie against Atletico Madrid. The Catalan giants host Diego Simeone's side today in the second leg after a heavy defeat by the Rojiblancos in February, needing a spectacular comeback if they are to defend the trophy.

"We are four goals behind, so we want to make the impossible possible, this is our goal for tomorrow," Flick told reporters. "We all know that it's not easy but in the end we never give up, and we start this match (aiming) for a clean sheet, believing in our strengths and that we can do it."

Barca thrashed Villarreal 4-1 on Saturday at Camp Nou in La Liga, with a hat-trick from teenager star Lamine Yamal, the first of his career. Flick said the winger would be important against Atletico but the team as a whole needed to deliver for Barca to make a comeback.

"The team is always in focus," said Flick. "The first goal from him was a great recovery of the ball and a great pass from Fermin (Lopez), (Yamal) has the outstanding quality to score this goal and be in the right position at this moment. How he played after that was great to see, really happy about that, but in the end we need everyone, not only Lamine."

Flick said the performance against Villarreal was a significant step forward for Barca and called on his players to deliver in similar fashion against Atletico. "We play against a fantastic team, they hurt us a lot in the last match, but we can do this," said Flick.

"We have to play smart, but with this hunger to make it happen. Last game against Villarreal



we saw a totally different team, a different dynamic, a different intensity in our game. We have to play like one unit and this is the key for tomorrow."

Barca will be without injured striker Robert Lewandowski but Pedri Gonzalez may be in line to start after a couple of substitute appearances following a hamstring problem.

Simeone said his team's way of stopping Yamal would be to force him back into his own territory. "He's a very good player individually, above all he can make things happen in the final third," said the coach. "We have to take advantage of the chance that it gives us to attack in that area, we have to take him to where he's most uncomfortable, which is defending."

With Atletico third in La Liga, 13 points behind leaders Barcelona, their best chances of silverware this season are via a cup route. "When you start in pre-season, you want to be fighting for everything in March. It's true we're a bit far from the top of La Liga, but we're doing well in the Copa and in the Champions League," added Simeone. "We are doing well where we are, fighting for what we want to fight for."

FIFA chief says players who cover mouths when speaking could be sent off

London: FIFA president Gianni Infantino has suggested players who cover their mouths while talking to opponents could be sent off, in light of racism allegations against Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni.

Argentina's Prestianni was accused of racially abusing Real Madrid forward Vinicius Junior during a Champions League game last month, while covering his mouth with his shirt. The issue was brought up at meeting of the International Football Association Board (IFAB).

"If a player covers his mouth and says something, and this has a racist consequence, then he has to be sent off, obviously," Infantino said. "There must be a presumption that he has said something he shouldn't have said, otherwise he wouldn't have had to cover his mouth. I simply do not understand -- if you don't

have something to hide, you don't hide your mouth when you say something. That's it, as simple as that. And these are actions that we can take and we have to take in order to be serious about our fight against racism."

The next FIFA Congress will be held next month in Vancouver, where football's governing body could decide to implement measures to stop players covering their mouths at this year's World Cup. Infantino also floated the possibility of different punishments for racist abuse depending on whether or not the guilty player publicly apologises.

Prestianni was provisionally suspended for the second leg of the Champions League tie pending the outcome of a UEFA investigation, and could be banned for 10 matches if found guilty. He denies racially abusing Vinicius.

Riyadh's King Fahd stadium to host 2027 Asian Cup final

Kuala Lumpur: Riyadh's King Fahd Sport City Stadium will host the opening and closing matches of next year's Asian Cup, officials announced, the football showpiece seen as a precursor for the 2034 World Cup in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia was awarded the World Cup but first will host the Asian Cup from January 7 to

February 5, 2027. "The King Fahd Sports City Stadium... will provide the backdrop for both the eagerly anticipated Final as well as the opening match, featuring hosts and three-time Asian champions Saudi Arabia," the AFC said in a statement in Kuala Lumpur.

The 70,000-plus venue in Riyadh will also host four group stage battles, a round of 16 tie and

a quarter-final match before the final in early February, the AFC added.

Popularly known as "The Tent" because of its roof, inspired by a traditional Bedouin dwelling, the stadium is the largest of the eight venues hosting the soccer showpiece. Asian Cup matches will also be played in Jeddah and Al Khobar.

Match pairings and kick-off times will be confirmed at the AFC's final draw on April 11 in Riyadh, the AFC said. Qatar, the 2022 World Cup host, staged and won the Asian Cup two years ago. The tournament was supposed to take place in China in 2023, but was moved out of the country because of the country's Covid policies at the time.

SPOTLIGHT

Mbappe in Paris for treatment on injury

AFP
Paris

France captain Kylian Mbappe was in Paris yesterday for treatment on a knee injury but no surgery is planned, the Real Madrid superstar's entourage said.

Mbappe was "in Paris accompanied by members of the Real Madrid medical staff," the striker's camp said in a statement. "In agreement with the club, he is undergoing further tests on his knee," it continued, "with the aim of optimising his follow-up care and preparing for his comeback. No surgical intervention is being planned at the moment."

Mbappe has been struggling with an injury to the external ligament of his left knee since the end of 2025 and missed last week's Champions League play-off second leg against Benfica due to "persistent pain" in training, sources close to the player said.

His entourage insisted there was no disagreement regarding the treatment required by the player between his club and the French national team, who will be desperate to have Mbappe fully fit for the upcoming World Cup.



"It was a bit of a consensus between everyone (Mbappe, the coach and the doctors), and we think the best thing is that he stops, that he recovers and comes back at 100 percent," Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa said late last week. "It's not going to be a question of days, it will be a bit longer, but I can't say how long, hopefully not too long."

It remains to be seen if Mbappe, who has scored 38 goals in 33 appearances for his club this season, will be able to play in the Champions League last-16 tie against Manchester City, the first leg of which is scheduled for March 11 with the return on March 17.

France have two friendly matches lined up in the United States at the end of the month, against Brazil in Boston on March 26 and Colombia in Washington three days later. Their first World Cup game is on June 16 against Senegal.

FOCUS

Wirtz out of Wolves game, Frimpong available

Reuters
Liverpool

Liverpool midfielder Florian Wirtz has been ruled out of today's game at bottom side Wolverhampton Wanderers in the Premier League but Dutch full-back Jeremie Frimpong is available, manager Arne Slot has said.

Wirtz, who suffered a back injury warming up ahead of last month's visit to Nottingham Forest, missed the 5-2 home win over West Ham United on Saturday.

"I think that (Tuesday's game) will be too early," Slot told reporters with fifth-placed Liverpool targeting a fourth straight league win when they visit Wolves. "I didn't expect him (Wirtz) not to be available for today, so sometimes things can develop in a positive or negative way in an injury, now we are thinking it doesn't have to be too long, but Tuesday will probably be too early. The week after will be tight as things stand now."

Frimpong made an encouraging impact off the bench against West Ham during the final minutes but Slot was cautious regarding his workload during a packed schedule. "Having Jeremie back is really nice but it (injury) does go through your mind because we play three games in seven days ... especially with players coming back from injuries," Slot said. "I prefer to have this problem ... rather than see him with the medical staff working on his recovery."

While Wolves have only two wins this season, Slot cautioned against complacency, noting their competitiveness. "We know that we are going to face a difficult game tomorrow," he added.



Florian Wirtz, who suffered a back injury warming up ahead of last month's visit to Nottingham Forest, missed Liverpool's 5-2 home win over West Ham United on Saturday. (Reuters)

Meanwhile, Slot said that the growing reliance on set pieces in the Premier League has sucked some of the joy out of football but accepts it is the new reality. Last season's champions struggled with dead-ball situations both defensively and in attacking areas earlier in the campaign. But seven of their past nine Premier League goals have come from set pieces, including three following corners in Saturday's 5-2 win against West Ham at Anfield. Premier League leaders Arsenal are renowned as the set-piece kings and on Sunday scored their 16th goal from a corner this season - equalling the league record. "First of all, you have to accept it. I think it's mainly here in the Premier League," Slot said. "If I watch other leagues, I don't think there's so much emphasis on set pieces."

The Liverpool manager said he felt goalkeepers in the Premier League were given less protection by match officials than those in other leagues such as the Dutch top division. "Here you can almost hit a goalkeeper in his face and the referee still says just go on," said the Dutchman. "Do I like it? My football heart doesn't like it."

Slot said he used to look forward to watching the great Barcelona side of Pep Guardiola, who were renowned for their silky, possession-based football. "Now, most of the games I see in the Premier League are not for me a joy to watch," he said. "But it's always interesting because it's so competitive, and that is what makes this league great, because there's so much competitiveness, everyone can beat everyone."