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CRICKET | Page 2
NZ captain Santner wants 'perfect game' to halt South Africa



GOLF | Page 3
DP World Tour 'extorting players' with LIV deal: Rahm

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FOOTBALL
Getafe deal flat Real Madrid La Liga title race blow

Page 4

FOOTBALL

Will Iran take part in the 2026 FIFA World Cup in US?

FIFA is remaining cautious regarding the possibility of Team Melli pulling out of the World Cup

AFP
Paris

The war in the Middle East triggered by US and Israeli strikes on Iran has raised the question of whether the Iranian national team will take part in the World Cup later this year, during which it is due to play group games in the United States.

WHAT IS IRAN'S POSITION?

The possibility of a boycott of the World Cup has been raised in Iran. Within hours of the joint US-Israeli strikes beginning on Saturday, Iranian Football Federation president Mehdi Taj told Iranian television: "What is certain at the present time is that with this attack and this cruelty, we cannot look forward to the World Cup with hope." Taj also announced that the Iranian domestic league had been suspended. "Team Melli", as the Iranian national team are known, secured qualification in March last year for a seventh World Cup, and a fourth in a row.

Iran have been drawn in Group G with Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand and are due to play two games in Los Angeles and one in Seattle. A large Iranian diaspora has lived in Los Angeles since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. A large part of that diaspora backed the Pahlavi dynasty which was overthrown in the revolution.

WHAT IS FIFA'S POSITION?

World football's governing body is remaining cautious regarding the possibility of Iran pulling out of the World Cup. "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 on Saturday.

A source close to FIFA said no discussions had yet taken place with the Iranian Football Federation regarding a possible withdrawal of the team from the tournament. Yesterday marked exactly 100 days to the tournament's opening game and the situation in Iran could become acutely uncomfortable for FIFA president Gianni Infantino, who has been keen to show that he has a close relationship with US President Donald Trump. All the more so as other countries in the Gulf who are due to take



Iran have been drawn in Group G with Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand and are due to play two games in Los Angeles and one in Seattle. (AFP)

part in the World Cup have been drawn into the war, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan all being targeted by retaliatory Iranian strikes.

WHAT DO FIFA'S REGULATIONS SAY?

FIFA's regulations do not provide for the possibility of a boycott of the World Cup by a qualified team. A source close to world football's governing body said "specific decisions" would have to be taken to replace Iran with another team if necessary.

Article 6 of the regulations for the 2026 World Cup says that "if a participating member association withdraws...as a result of force majeure," FIFA "shall decide

on the matter at its sole discretion and take whatever action is deemed necessary."

If a team withdraws or is excluded from the competition, FIFA therefore has the freedom to take whatever decision it sees fit and "may decide to replace the participating member association in question with another association."

It would seem logical that an eventual absence of Iran from the competition would open the way for another Asian nation to take their place. At the moment eight Asian teams have qualified for the first World Cup to feature 48 teams in total. There could yet be a ninth Asian team, if Iraq win an intercontinental play-off

against either Bolivia or Suriname, scheduled to be played on March 31 in Monterrey, Mexico.

HAS A COUNTRY BOYCOTTED A WORLD CUP BEFORE?

There have been boycotts of the Olympics, impacting most notably the Games in Moscow in 1980 and in Los Angeles four years later, during the Cold War. But there has not yet been an equivalent situation at a World Cup.

Several qualified teams withdrew from the 1950 World Cup, but for different reasons. Turkey cited financial reasons, while Scotland said they would only go if they

won the 1949/50 British Home Championship - FIFA said the top two out of the four teams would qualify, but Scotland finished second to England and so refused to go.

Yugoslavia qualified for the 1992 European Championship but the outbreak of war in the Balkans led to UEFA replacing them with Denmark - who had finished behind Yugoslavia in their qualifying group - barely two weeks before the tournament began. Denmark went on to win the trophy. Russian clubs and national teams have been suspended from all international competitions by FIFA and UEFA since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

FOCUS

How the Middle East crisis has affected sporting events, athletes

Reuters
Doha

Iran's ongoing conflict with the US and Israel has led to sporting events being postponed in several countries, while competitions elsewhere have been hit by travel disruption, with thousands of flights cancelled in some of the world's busiest transit hubs.

ATHLETES' ARRIVALS AT PARA GAMES DISRUPTED

The International Paralympic Committee said it is working to find solutions after several athletes were finding it difficult to travel to the Milano Cortina Winter Paralympic Games due to travel disruptions in several Middle Eastern airports. "The closure of airspace in the Middle East is impacting the arrival of some stakeholders... we are working diligently with Milano Cortina to find solutions for those affected," the IPC said.

FOOTBALL MATCHES IN IRAN AND QATAR POSTPONED

All sporting events in Iran have been cancelled until further notice, including the country's top-flight Persian Gulf Pro League. All Asian Champions League Elite



Russian players Daniil Medvedev (left) and Andrey Rublev, who participated in the Dubai Tennis Championships last week, are facing challenges to reach California for the Indian Wells Open.

matches in the Middle East were also postponed. The Qatar Football Association indefinitely postponed all football matches in the country, putting in doubt a clash between Spain and Argentina set

for Doha on March 27.

TENNIS PLAYERS MEDVEDEV, RUBLEV STUCK IN DUBAI

Russian players Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev, who partici-

pated in the Dubai Tennis Championships last week, are facing challenges to reach California for the Indian Wells Open.

They are among players facing travel difficulties.

TENNIS IN UAE HALTED DUE TO SECURITY ALERT

Play in the Fujairah Challenger event was halted abruptly due to a security alert yesterday, before being cancelled for the remainder of the day. Authorities in Fujairah extinguished a fire caused by debris following the interception of a drone by air defences in the oil industry zone.

ENGLAND LIONS RETURN FROM ABU DHABI

The England Lions cricket team left Abu Dhabi and are now safely back in the UK, the country's cricket board (ECB) said. The squad were in the United Arab Emirates for a white-ball series against Pakistan Shaheens before it was called off due to the conflict. Pakistan's cricket board said it was ensuring appropriate measures were in place to bring its team home.

MIDDLE EASTERN F1 RACES HANG IN THE BALANCE

Mohammed Ben Sulayem, who heads the global motorsport governing body FIA, said safety will be their main concern when taking a decision on next month's Formula One races in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. "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," he said on Monday.

INDIA'S SINDHU WITHDRAWS FROM ALL ENGLAND OPEN

Two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu was stranded for days at Dubai airport on her way to the All England Open, and returned to India as the Badminton World Federation said the former world champion had withdrawn from the tournament. "Back home in Bangalore and safe. The last few days have been intense and uncertain, but I'm truly grateful to be back to my house," Sindhu wrote on X.

WINDIES, ZIMBABWE DELAY RETURN FROM T20 WORLD CUP

The West Indies and Zimbabwe teams said on Monday they have delayed their return from India after their exit from the Twenty20 World Cup. Zimbabwe were scheduled to return home via Dubai but remain safe and well in India, the country's cricket body said. Cricket West Indies said it was working with the sport's global body (ICC) to make safe travel arrangements for its players and staff.

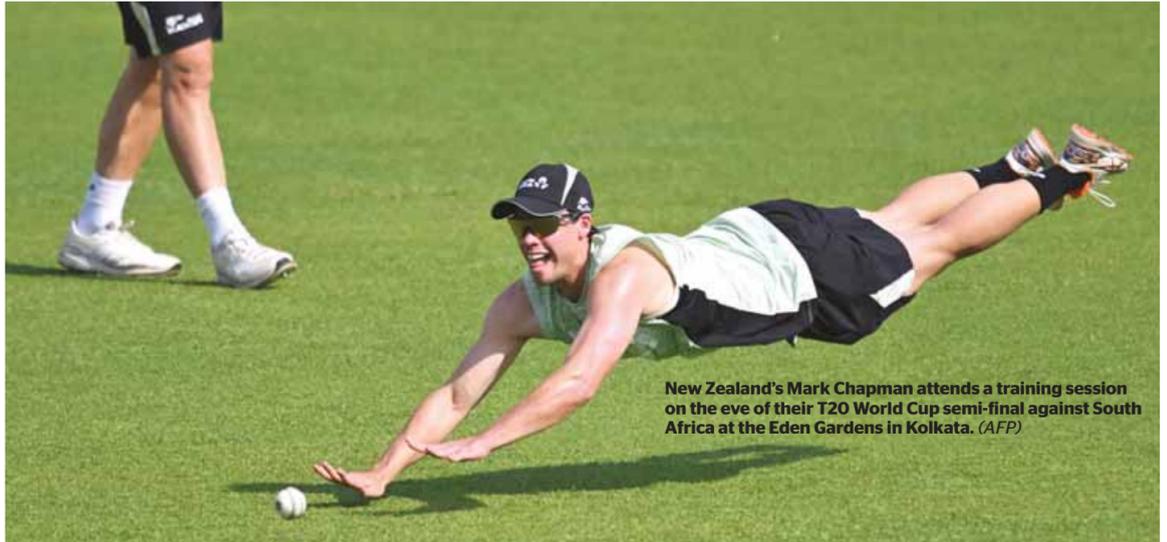
PREVIEW

Santner wants a 'perfect game' to halt South Africa

Proteas are unbeaten with seven consecutive wins but NZ aim to break the rival's winning streak



South Africa's batsmen Tristan Stubbs (left) and Rayan Rickelton (centre) yesterday take part in a training session on the eve of their T20 World Cup semi-final match against New Zealand at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata. (AFP)



New Zealand's Mark Chapman attends a training session on the eve of their T20 World Cup semi-final against South Africa at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata. (AFP)

Reuters
Kolkata

New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner wants his team to piece together their first "perfect game" of the Twenty20 World Cup when they face in-form South Africa in today's semi-final at Eden Gardens with a wound fresh in their minds.

South Africa remain the tournament's only unbeaten team and their seven wins in a row include a seven-wicket thumping of New Zealand in the group stage.

While that loss still rankled, Santner said the familiarity bred from that clash left little room for surprises.

"We haven't probably played the perfect game throughout this tournament. I guess that's a good thing for us," Santner told reporters yesterday.

"I guess we can put it all together, put us in a pretty good position. "I think there's no real hiding or secrets about what South Africa are going to bring for us. We know they're going to probably roll out the same team... they probably know what we're going to do as well."

Having played all three Super Eights games in Sri Lanka, New Zealand are wary of how the pitch at the Eden Gardens would behave and are braced to adjust.

While 2024 runners-up South Africa appear

more balanced on paper, Santner said the contest will hinge on who reads conditions fastest.

"It's all up to the surface and adapting as quick as we can...they have kind of all bases covered," he said. "That's why they're undefeated."

Both teams are chasing a first men's white-ball World Cup and Santner promised a full-throttle effort to reach Sunday's final.

"We know the heartbreak of South Africa two years ago. I think again, they're playing some very good cricket, as they've shown throughout this tournament. We know South Africa are going to be a threat, as they've shown. We're just going to go there and try to put some pressure on them at different stages of the game, and they're going to do the same for us."

New Zealand fast bowler Matt Henry, who had returned home on paternity leave, rejoined the squad last night and Santner could not confirm if he would play in the semi-final.

WARY MARKRAM KEEPS UNBEATEN SA GROUNDED AHEAD OF SEMI-FINAL

South Africa may be in red-hot form at the Twenty20 World Cup, but captain Aiden Markram said they will take nothing for granted in today's semi-final against New Zealand, especially with his side moving to a new venue for them in the tournament.

"I wish cricket was that easy," Markram, who has often set the tone for his team in the power-

play, said with a wry smile at a press conference yesterday.

"New Zealand is a quality team, they've proved that over many years now.

"We had a good runout against them in the group stage. But both teams have played a lot of cricket since then, and it's completely a fresh start tomorrow. I don't think it's as straightforward as just being able to repeat that again."

Conditions at Eden Gardens are another variable. Markram said South Africa studied India's win over West Indies on Sunday for clues and took a close look at the surface.

"I briefly walked out to the wicket. It looks pretty good again. I think it's the darker soil. So we'll have to not just wing it but come up with ways out in the middle after having seen a couple of balls... and back those plans from there."

Markram said South Africa's perfect run was down to their smart cricket, highlighting the calm decision-making coursing through the group and the influence of wicketkeeper-batter Quinton de Kock.

"I think it's more just around making really good decisions under pressure. We've got a lot of good experience in the group. Quinny reads conditions really well from behind the stumps, and that makes a massive difference for us. We get that around the group, and the guys come up with plans from there. Ultimately, you need to execute them. We don't try to complicate too much."

SPOTLIGHT

History-seeking India face improving England

Reuters
Bengaluru

India, bidding to become the first team to successfully defend the Twenty20 World Cup title, face an England side building momentum in their semi-final at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium tomorrow.

The teams are meeting in the last four of the tournament for the third time in a row, with one victory apiece, and the winners went on to lift the trophy on each occasion.

India won it in 2024 without losing a match but they suffered a setback in a Super Eight stage defeat by South Africa this time around, before responding well with victories over Zimbabwe and West Indies.

"You've got to win every game in which you represent your country ... you have to play your 'A' game every time," coach Gautam Gambhir told reporters. "It comes down to experience as well and mental strength. Come the big games, the knockout games, the World Cups, it's all about mental (toughness), not about skill."

India's top order has struggled at the tournament with opener Abhishek Sharma, the top-ranked batter in the format, managing only 80 runs in six matches with three ducks



India's captain Suryakumar Yadav (centre) greets his teammate Sanju Samson (right) after their team's win in the World Cup Super Eights match against West Indies in Kolkata on Sunday. (AFP)

to his name. Sanju Samson's unbeaten 97 in their win over West Indies was a welcome boost, however, and India boast explosive firepower in the middle order with Suryakumar Yadav, Tilak Varma, Hardik Pandya and Shivam Dube.

There are fewer concerns over the hosts' bowling unit led by top-ranked leg-spinner

Varun Chakravarthy and pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, though the fielding needs to improve after 13 dropped catches.

Twice champions England will be confident of causing an upset having found form following a sketchy start to the tournament.

All-rounder Will Jacks has scored 191 runs down the order and captured seven wickets to earn four player-of-the-match awards, and captain Harry Brook, Tom Banton and Sam Curran have all made useful contributions with the bat.

"If there's ever a time we want to play our perfect game, it's probably Thursday night," Curran told reporters yesterday.

"We've all been chipping in at different times but we know in T20 cricket it probably just takes a couple of our guys to come good with bat and ball."

Former captain Jos Buttler has struggled badly, however, making only 62 runs in seven matches, and his opening partner Phil Salt also looks short of confidence.

England spinners Adil Rashid, Liam Dawson and Jacks will look to disrupt India's rhythm, particularly at the Wankhede, where the shorter boundaries and a turning track could prove to be decisive.

"It's a fantastic stadium, obviously very iconic," Curran added.

COMMENT

England 'not fearing anything' against India

AFP
Mumbai, India

England will go into their T20 World Cup semi-final against India with no fear, said all-rounder **Sam Curran** yesterday, adding that their first job would be to silence a raucous home crowd.

England will take on the favourites and hosts in front of 35,000 fiercely partisan fans in Mumbai tomorrow, with a place in the final against South Africa or New Zealand at stake.

The noise will be deafening at times in the cauldron-like confines of the Wankhede Stadium. But Curran said that because he and many of his England teammates - such as Will Jacks at Mumbai Indians - play in the Indian Premier League (IPL), they will not be fazed.

"It's an experience as a young cricketer you dream of - playing India in the semi-final of a World Cup," left-arm seamer Curran told reporters.

Curran was in the international wilderness a year ago but forced his way back into the England squad with eye-catching performances in T20 franchise leagues, including the IPL.

"India are a quality side but we've played a lot of cricket here. We know how to play on these grounds and we know what to expect," he said.

"The IPL, no question, has helped a lot. Having played in the ground many times, there's not many unknowns."

England experienced a hostile crowd at the Wankhede in their first match of the tournament when they beat Nepal in a final-ball thriller.

It was Curran who bowled the nerveless final "death" over, con-



ceding just five runs when Nepal needed 10, to stave off an embarrassing defeat. He then repeated the feat against Italy and has contributed with the bat from number six, scoring 149 runs so far with a best of 43 not out.

"We're not fearing anything and I'm sure both teams are really excited by the challenge," Curran said, adding England could judge how well they were playing by the volume of the fans.

"If the crowd are silent, England are probably going to be doing well. That's our positive way of looking at it," said Curran.

It is the third T20 World Cup in a row that England will have played India in the semi-finals and each time the winners went on to lift the trophy. In 2022, England crushed India by 10 wickets in Adelaide and went on to beat Pakistan in the Melbourne final.

Two years ago India won in Guyana by a similarly dominant 68 runs before downing South Africa in Barbados.

South Africa face New Zealand in the first semi-final on Wednesday. The final will take place on Sunday in Ahmedabad.

"I guess this is what the last four or five weeks have been building for," said Curran. "And hopefully we can take one more step towards the final."

RCB to return to Chinnaswamy Stadium for IPL games after safety improvements

Bengaluru: Royal Challengers Bengaluru will play five home matches in this year's Indian Premier League at the Chinnaswamy Stadium, where a stampede killed 11 people in June while fans were celebrating their maiden IPL title outside the arena, the franchise said yesterday. The stadium will stage this month's tournament opener and a playoff match as well as the final, Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA) president Venkatesh Prasad told news agency PTI.

The decision to return to their stadium, which has not staged cricket matches with fans in attendance while the local government reviewed its safety arrangements, was taken after discussions with the KSCA, Bengaluru said in a statement. "The collective efforts to ramp up infrastructure and safety measures in time for the IPL season have ensured that the defending champions will play the majority of their home games at their home ground," Bengaluru said.

Bengaluru will also play two of their seven home games in the IPL's league phase in Raipur. Local media reports said the KSCA, led by former Indian international Prasad, conducted an infrastructure overhaul to improve fan safety. "We sincerely thank the Government of Karnataka, the KSCA, and the Karnataka police for their support in making this possible," Bengaluru's CEO Rajesh Menon told reporters.

GOLF

DP World Tour 'extorting players' with LIV deal: Rahm

'THEY'RE USING OUR IMPACT IN TOURNAMENTS AND FINING US'

AFP
Hong Kong

Jon Rahm accused the DP World Tour yesterday of "extorting players" as he explained why he did not sign a deal to settle his fines for playing on the breakaway LIV tour.

Last month, the European-based circuit announced that eight LIV players had signed the agreement, which included a commitment to play more DP World Tour events, in return for a release to play LIV Golf in 2026 and their fines being paid. One of the eight was Rahm's Ryder Cup and LIV Legion XIII teammate Tyrrell Hatton.

"I don't like the conditions," Rahm told reporters ahead of this week's LIV Hong Kong tournament.

"They're asking me to play a minimum of six events, and they dictate where two of those have to be, amongst other things that I don't agree with."

Rahm is reported to have racked up fines totalling \$3mn for playing on the LIV Tour without permission from the DP World Tour.

"Two years ago I was asked to appeal the fines, so they could figure this out," said Rahm at Hong Kong Golf Club.

"I did and we're running into more problems right now... I don't know what game they're trying to play," said Rahm.

"They're using our impact in tournaments and fining us."

"(The DP World Tour is) trying to benefit both ways from what we have to offer, and it's just, in a way, they're extorting players like myself and young players that have nothing to do with the politics of the game."

"So I don't like the situation and I'm not going to agree to that."



He said he would agree to play four events, which would be in line with current membership rules, but not six. "I did tell them, funnily enough, lower that to four events, like the minimum says, and I'll sign tonight," said Rahm. "They haven't agreed to that. I just refuse to play six events. I don't want to, and that's not what the rules say."

If Rahm sticks to his current position, he would be ineligible to compete for the European team at the 2027 Ry-

der Cup in Limerick, Ireland. He has part of the European squad for the past four competitions, winning the title three times while compiling a 9-5-3 record.

Hatton, a four-team Team Europe member who owns an 8-4-3 record in the Ryder Cup, made himself eligible by agreeing to the DPWT's terms.

"I'll gladly pay my way to go on the Ryder Cup, not have to pay to still be a member of the DP World Tour and ful-

fill a commitment that I'm fully willing to commit," Rahm said.

Even with drama surrounding him off the course, Rahm is performing well. He finished as runner-up in each of the first two LIV events of the season, at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Adelaide, Australia, as he looks ahead to the tournament in Hong Kong that starts today. "Happy with my play so far," Rahm said. "I wish I could have converted one of those wins."

BADMINTON

Sindhu returns home from Dubai ordeal, withdraws from All England Open

Reuters
Bengaluru

PV Sindhu has returned to India after being stranded at Dubai airport on her way to the All England Open, with the Badminton World Federation (BWF) saying yesterday the former world champion had withdrawn from the tournament.

Global air travel remained heavily disrupted on Sunday as war in Iran kept major Middle Eastern airports including Dubai, the world's busiest international hub, closed for a second day in one of the sharpest aviation shocks in recent years.

Dubai Airports said flights partially resumed on Monday, mainly to repatriate stranded passengers.

"Back home in Bangalore and safe. The last few days have been intense and uncertain, but I'm truly grateful to be back to my house," Sindhu wrote on X.

Sindhu, a double Olympics medallist, had been scheduled to face Thailand's Supanida Katethong in the first round but has now been replaced by Taiwan's Hsu Wen-chi.

The BWF said Thai third seeds Dechapol Puvananukroh and Supissara Paewsampran were also forced to withdraw from the mixed doubles.

Sindhu also thanked the authorities in Dubai before adding: "For now, it's time to rest, reset, and figure out the next steps."

Israel broadened its campaign with new strikes on Iran and Hezbollah, while Tehran launched missiles and drones toward Israel, several Gulf states and a British air base in Cyprus, raising concerns of a prolonged conflict.



PREVIEW

Alcaraz defends perfect start as Sabalenka seeks reset at Indian Wells

Reuters
Indian Wells, California

Carlos Alcaraz puts his flawless start to the season on the line and fellow top seed Aryna Sabalenka aims to regroup from Australian Open disappointment as Indian Wells begins this week.

Alcaraz arrives in the Southern California desert fresh off completing the career Grand Slam in Melbourne and carrying a 12-0 record for 2026. The 22-year-old Spaniard, already a two-times champion at the prestigious event, could be headed for another high-profile showdown with rival Jannik Sinner in what has become the sport's most compelling match-up.

"What's interesting about Carlos and Jannik is that whenever one gains an edge, the other goes away, figures things out, and comes back better," Tennis Channel analyst Prakash Amritraj told Reuters this week.

Novak Djokovic, meanwhile, continues to defy expectations in the twilight of his career. The Serbian great stunned Sinner with a gritty five-set comeback win in Melbourne and remains a force at the biggest events. "Djokovic managed to move the unmovable mountain that is Jannik Sinner," Amritraj said. "To come from behind in five sets, while also making the semis of all four majors last year, is hard to put into words."

Djokovic, a 24-times Grand Slam champion who has rewrit-

ten much of tennis history, could break his tie with Roger Federer for the most Indian Wells titles should he lift a sixth trophy.

On the women's side, Belarusian power-hitter Sabalenka returns to action for the first time since her bid for a third Australian Open crown was halted by Elena Rybakina. Despite several painful losses in title matches, Sabalenka has been the steadiest presence in a frequently unpredictable WTA landscape, reaching five of the past six Grand Slam finals. "Sabalenka has been the most consistent player at that level," Amritraj said.

"She hasn't always crossed the finish line, but in my mind she is still the clear number one. Regardless of that loss to Rybakina in Australia, she's my favourite here."



Novak Djokovic with his coach Boris Bosnjakovic during his practice session for the Indian Wells Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, California. (Jayne Kamin-Oncea-Imagn Images)

FOCUS

UAE tennis tournament disrupted as drone attack sparks oil fire

AFP
Dubai

An ATP Challenger tennis tournament in the UAE's Fujairah was interrupted yesterday after drone strikes on nearby oil refineries.

Falling debris from the interception of a drone caused a fire in an oil field located around 15km (nine miles) from the site of the tournament on the men's second-tier global circuit.

"Play at the ATP Challenger Tour event in Fujairah was suspended today following a security alert," the ATP said in a statement.

"In line with established security protocols, play was immediately halted and players, officials and staff were directed to designated safe areas."

"The health, safety and well-being of our players, staff and tournament personnel is our priority."

"Following consultation with local authorities and security advisors, play has been cancelled for the remainder of the day as a precautionary measure."

A video on social media shows two players, Belarusian Daniil Ostapenko and Japan's Hayato Matsuoka, scrambling for shelter after a public announcement.

Ten matches in the first round of qualifying for the tournament were completed Monday.

"I just finished my match in Fujairah, second round, but the play is suspended for today," said Ukrainian player Vladyslav Orlov on Instagram.

"When I was playing, I heard the sound of the jets flying here and there. And there is smoke

here, next to the mountain, so not very safe here right now."

The UAE has been targeted by more than 800 drones and 200 missiles since Saturday, according to its Ministry of Defense.

The US and Israel triggered the rapidly spreading war on Saturday with a strike on Tehran that killed supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and several more senior Iranian figures, followed by days of air and missile raids aimed at weakening the remaining government.

But Iran's armed forces responded with missile and drone attacks on Israel, US embassies and military bases and on its Arab neighbours around the Gulf.

On Monday, the International Tennis Federation told AFP that two third-tier men's tournaments scheduled for later in March in Fujairah had been postponed.

SPOTLIGHT

IOC calls for 'support' for Milan-Cortina Paralympians from war-affected nations

Reuters
London

The International Olympic Committee appealed for "support" for athletes travelling to the Milan-Cortina Paralympics from war-affected countries, but refused to explicitly comment on the US-Israeli war with Iran.

The Paralympics opening ceremony will be held in Verona on Friday, less than a week since conflict erupted in the Middle East.

Without naming any country, the IOC lamented a "world shaken by conflict, division and tragedy."

It reiterated that it had "no means of enforcing" the resolution on the Olympic Truce,

adopted last November by the United Nations. This non-binding text, inspired by the safe passage granted to participants in the ancient Games, aimed in particular to allow all athletes qualified for last month's Winter Olympics and the Winter Paralympics that open in Italy on Friday "to travel to the host country".

"We therefore appeal to all UN Member States to support athletes who have qualified for the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Paralympics, and who may be affected by the most recent conflicts, in their journey to these Games," the IOC said in a statement. When contacted by AFP, an IOC spokesperson confirmed that the body would not comment further on the Israeli-American strikes launched on

Saturday against Iran, nor on the retaliatory attacks carried out by Tehran in the Gulf.

The IOC's reaction contrasts sharply to its response after Russia invaded Ukraine four years ago.

Then, the IOC immediately condemned "the violation of the Olympic Truce by the Russian government and by the Belarusian government that supports it" and then recommended that international federations cancel their competitions scheduled in both countries and ban their flags - recommendations that remain in effect.

It also recommended the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from all international events, before reinstating them under a neutral flag and strict conditions a year later.

Pogacar team-mate Wellens ruled out of spring classics

Belgian Tim Wellens, a key UAE teammate of Tadej Pogacar, has been ruled out of the upcoming spring classics season after a crash last weekend, he announced yesterday. Wellens was one of several riders to fall in a collision during Sunday's Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne one-day race in Belgium. "The 2026 Classics are over before they even began," he said in a post on social media. "Right clavicle fractured. Surgery went well thanks to

the excellent medical team at the hospital, and the recovery process has already started. Very disappointed to miss the upcoming races, but I'll be fully supporting my @uae_team_employees teammates from home." Wellens joined UAE Team Emirates in 2023, playing a supporting role in Pogacar's Tour of Flanders victories that year and in 2025, as well as the Slovenian's third and fourth Tour de France triumphs in 2024 and 2025.

LA LIGA

Getafe deal flat Real Madrid title race blow

Real were beaten at Osasuna last weekend, allowing rivals Barca to overtake them

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid fell to a damaging 1-0 defeat by Getafe at home in La Liga on Monday, leaving them four points behind leaders Barcelona. Alvaro Arbeloa's side, beaten by a superb volley from Martin Satriano, suffered a second consecutive loss in the Spanish top flight for the first time since 2020.

Madrid forward Franco Mastantuono was sent off in stoppage time for apparent dissent to make a bad night worse for Los Blancos.

"Obviously it's a match where we could have done things better, but I think my players tried and we had more clear chances than them," Arbeloa told reporters. "However in football deserving isn't enough, and Getafe played a great game."

With French superstar Kylian Mbappe in France to treat a knee sprain, Madrid lined up with Gonzalo Garcia in attack alongside Brazil star Vinicius Junior at the Santiago Bernabeu. Real Madrid were beaten at Osasuna last weekend, allowing rivals Barca to overtake them in the title race, and Hansi Flick's side stretched their lead by thrashing Villarreal on Saturday.

Vinicius, in excellent form in 2026 after an inconsistent start to the season, spurned a fine early chance.

The winger burst through on goal but David Soria saved well with his leg. A brilliant roulette from Arda Guler nearly earned Madrid the breakthrough but Soria tipped over the Turkish forward's strike.

Getafe were upset by a painful collision between Madrid defender Antonio Rudiger and Diego Rico, in which the German's knee knocked the Spaniard's head. Uruguayan forward Satriano broke the deadlock with a delicious strike from the edge of the box after compatriot Mauro Arambarri nodded the ball into his path.

Soria, who had a fine game, saved from Vinicius in the second half and the Brazilian called for more support from Madrid's fans. However the team were not giving them much to get excited about, although Rudiger came close to levelling with a header.

It was a disjointed display from a Madrid side who visit Celta Vigo on Friday in La Liga, before hosting Pep Guardiola's Manchester City in the Champions League last 16, unsure if top scorer Mbappe will be fit to play.

In stoppage time Mastantuono was dis-



Getafe's Martin Satriano (centre) celebrates after scoring against Real Madrid at Santiago Bernabeu Stadium in Madrid. (AFP)

Real Madrid's Rudiger tried to 'smash my face in': Getafe's Rico

Madrid: Getafe's Diego Rico said yesterday Real Madrid's Antonio Rudiger tried to "smash my face in" in a La Liga match in the Spanish capital the previous evening.

There was an incident involving the two defenders in the first half of the match visitors Getafe won 1-0 at the Santiago Bernabeu on Monday.

Germany centre-back Rudiger hit Rico in the head with his knee to the anger of Getafe's players.

"I think in these situations, an act of ag-

gression, you can tell he's going for me on purpose," Rico said.

"In the previous action (between us) the referee called for a foul and on his way back to defend he was saying things. Then on the very next play the ball came to me and you can see how he practically moved his team-mate out of the way just to smash my face in. If he had caught me wrong he could have left me there, flat on the pitch."

Rico was able to carry on playing after the incident. The left-back said that if he

had committed the same offence he would have been "banned for 10 games" and not played the rest of the season.

Madrid's defeat, their second in a row in La Liga, left them four points behind leaders Barcelona.

Former Chelsea and Roma defender Rudiger, who turned 33 on Tuesday, was given a six-match ban last season after throwing an object at a referee during Madrid's Copa del Rey final defeat by Barcelona.

missed, seemingly for something he said to the referee, before Getafe were also reduced to 10 men when Adrian Liso kicked the ball away and was shown a second yellow card.

"Nobody here is throwing in the towel, this is Real Madrid, you don't give up until

the last game," added Arbeloa.

"Four points is a distance that we can cut back and we will fight for that."

Jose Bordalas's Getafe rose to 11th and were able to celebrate their first win at the Bernabeu since 2008.

"It's very hard to get points when you come here, I have to congratulate the team for the work in defence, then we got our goal and we could even have scored another in the end," said Getafe defender Kiko Femenia.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Each to their own, says Guardiola, as set piece debate deepens

Reuters
London

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola and Arsenal counterpart Mikel Arteta share a common goal in their battle for Premier League supremacy but are going about achieving it in very different ways.

While leaders Arsenal have become kings of the set piece this season, scoring 33% of their 58 goals from such situations, including 16 from corner routines, City have largely shunned the Premier League's new obsession.

This season, 27% of all Premier League goals have come from set pieces, more than any other league in Europe and the highest percentage in England's top flight since 2009-10.

Corners have led to 138 goals, already more than in the whole of the previous campaign.

Guardiola brought his famed tika-taka style to the Premier League when he arrived at City in 2016 and has remained faithful to an intricate possession-based style during a glittering reign that has delivered six English titles and provided a blueprint that many others tried to follow.

The signing of goal-machine Erling Haaland led to a slightly more direct style in recent seasons, but City's essence remains intact, evidenced by the fact they are



second-bottom of the table based on goals scored from set plays at 10.5%. "Set-pieces have started to be important. It was different when I started as a manager," Guardiola told reporters ahead of his side's crucial home clash with Nottingham Forest which they need to win to keep the pressure on Arsenal. "When I was a young boy we said the people in England celebrate corners and free-kicks like a goal. I remember perfectly, so nothing has changed in that way."

Arsenal are not lacking for flair players and usually dominate possession but were labelled "ugly" by pundit Chris Sutton after a 2-1 win over Chelsea on Sunday in which both goals arrived via headers from corners. The sight of players grappling, holding and blocking like wrestlers before corners was a feature of the derby but it is what

enticed millions across the world to tune in.

Liverpool manager Arne Slot said games are no longer "a joy" while Chelsea's Liam Rosenior has demanded a review to control the rugby-like scrums at corners.

City will aim to keep the pressure firmly on Arsenal by beating struggling Forest, but do not expect to see Guardiola demanding long throws or for his side to play for corners. Not that he was being drawn too deeply into the debate about Arsenal's methods as he addressed the media.

"It is the business I am in. I am a manager. I can't say 'I don't like set-pieces! I adapt and do it,'" Guardiola said. "Football has been played in so many ways since it was created. How it is played in England is different in the way it is played in Spain or Italy. Every manager plays in different ways. How boring would it be if all the managers played in the same way. I have to adapt. If I don't like, I don't watch but I have to adapt."

Arsenal, who are five points clear having played one game more than City, travel to Brighton & Hove Albion, whose manager Fabian Hurler knows what is coming. "It is definitely a big strength from Arsenal, they do it in an impressive way this season," he said. "They have a lot of good takers, they have a lot of physicality, so it is definitely something we have to take care of, but we will stick to our principles."

SPOTLIGHT

Arteta fires back at critics of Arsenal's set-piece success

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta has hit back at critics of Arsenal's dependence on set-pieces, saying he is disappointed the Premier League leaders do not score even more goals from dead-ball situations. Arteta's side have established a five-point lead at the top of the league thanks in large part to their success from set-pieces. They equalled the Premier League single-season record for goals from corners with two in Sunday's 2-1 win over Chelsea to reach 16 for the campaign.

But Arsenal's excellence since Nicolas Jover took over as set-piece coach has sparked criticism of their reliance on the tactic. The debate on whether set-pieces are ruining football as a spectacle is raging, with Liverpool boss Arne Slot revealing he no longer enjoys watching some Premier League matches. Former Chelsea striker Chris Sutton, a Premier League title winner with Blackburn, said Arsenal will be the "ugliest" Premier League champions if they go on to clinch the title.

Arteta is unrepentant, insisting his only concern about the use of set-pieces is making sure Arsenal are even more efficient with them. "I'm upset that we don't score more, and that we concede



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta (right) with midfielders Eberechi Eze (left) and Martin Zubimendi during a training session.

as well," he told reporters, on the eve of a trip to Brighton. "We want to be the best and the most dominant team in every aspect of the game, and that's the trajectory and the aim of this team, and as a club, we want to be the same. So we try to do that."

Asked if he was surprised at the criticism aimed at his side, Arteta replied: "Part of the job."

City manager Pep Guardiola believes teams should focus on adapting to the set-piece strategy rather than complaining about the issue. Arteta, who worked under Guardiola at City before joining Arsenal, agrees with his fellow Spaniard's assessment.

"Now teams are adapting. Chelsea, look at the quality that

Brazilian winger Rodrygo set to miss World Cup with knee injury

Madrid: Real Madrid said their winger Rodrygo Goes has suffered a severe knee injury, and it is expected to keep him out of the World Cup with Brazil this summer. Rodrygo appeared as a substitute in Madrid's 1-0 home La Liga defeat by Getafe on Monday, where he sustained the injury.

The 25-year-old stayed on the pitch but tests revealed the severity of his injury. Rodrygo had only just returned to action after a month out with tendonitis.

Carlo Ancelotti, formerly Rodrygo's coach at Real Madrid, will not be able to call on the forward for record five-time winners Brazil's bid to secure a sixth World Cup trophy this summer in the United States. Real Madrid will also miss the forward, particularly with French superstar Kylian Mbappe currently sidelined because of a knee sprain.

Alvaro Arbeloa only has three fit attackers available, in Vinicius Junior, Gonzalo Garcia and Franco Mastantuono, ahead of next week's Champions League last 16 clash against Manchester City at the Santiago Bernabeu.

BRAZIL'S FLAMENGO SACK COACH FILIPE LUIS DESPITE 8-0 WIN

Flamengo shocked Brazilian football by sacking coach Filipe Luis just hours after an 8-0 win in the Campeonato Carioca semi-finals. Filipe Luis had been at the helm of the Rio de Janeiro giants since September 2024 and led them to their fourth Copa Libertadores title last season after a 1-0 victory over Palmeiras in the final.

But Brazil's richest club fired their coach, who was said to be taken aback as it came just hours after the 8-0 win over regional rivals Madureira gave Flamengo a crushing 11-0 aggregate victory in the state Carioca competition.

The 40-year-old former Chelsea and Atletico Madrid defender also took Flamengo to the Brazilian Serie A and Carioca titles last year. They reached the Club World Cup last 16 before suffering a 4-2 defeat by Bayern Munich, beating eventual champions Chelsea en route to winning their group.

But Flamengo have suffered some disappointing results this year, losing the Brazilian Super Cup final to Corinthians.

Tickets for World Cup playoffs in Mexico go on sale for as little as \$11

Guadalajara: Tickets for this month's World Cup Playoff tournament in Mexico went on sale yesterday at bargain prices compared to the finals, with fans able to secure a seat for as little as 200 Mexican pesos (\$11.33), FIFA announced. The tournament will determine two of the final six na-

tions to qualify for the first 48-team World Cup, set to take place in the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19. Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bolivia, New Caledonia, Jamaica and Suriname will play at two stadiums that are also venues for the World Cup finals.

Guadalajara and Monterrey will stage the inter-confederation playoff tournament from March 26-31, with FIFA saying ticket prices are in the range of 200 to 300 Mexican pesos. The prices are in stark contrast to the finals where the eye-watering costs have fans crying foul. The cheapest ticket

for the finals is \$60 but dynamic pricing and the resale market have left many fans priced out.

The violence that erupted near host city Guadalajara after the death of Mexico's most-wanted cartel leader caused concern but Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum

said there was "no risk" to fans coming to the country. As the countdown to the 2026 World Cup reached 100 days to go, officials in Jalisco said the host state was prepared and secure, following unrest that briefly disrupted sporting events in the Guadalajara area.