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'I'll be at next World Cup' in 2030: Somali referee barred from US

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FOOTBALL

FIFA chief Infantino defends visa handling, ticket prices

World Cup kicks off today at Mexico City's Estadio Azteca, where hosts take on South Africa

Reuters
Mexico City

FIFA President Gianni Infantino defended the way football's governing body had handled visa issues ahead of the World Cup, saying yesterday that it was working to find solutions but could not override government decisions.

Speaking on the eve of the tournament opener between co-hosts Mexico and South Africa, Infantino addressed concerns surrounding Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan, who was barred from entering the US despite having a valid visa.

"It is unfortunate what happened to the referee from Somalia," Infantino told a press conference.

"We are not the kings of the world who can rule over governments and police forces. We are a sports organisation."

The case has drawn attention to immigration challenges ahead of the June 11-July 19 tournament after US authorities said Artan was denied entry because of his links to "suspected members of terror organisations".

Artan, voted Africa's top men's referee last year, insisted he had the correct visa to enter the United States but he was turned back at Miami International Airport and then put on a flight back to Turkey at the weekend. Artan would have been the first match official from Somalia to officiate at a World Cup finals.

Infantino said FIFA was continuing to work behind the scenes to resolve outstanding issues but stressed that immigration decisions ultimately rested with national authorities. "We always try to find solutions," he said. "Sometimes to immediately start screaming and shouting has the opposite effect of finding a solution."

Infantino was asked by a British reporter



Asked whether visa-related controversies had made him regret selecting the US as one of the host nations, FIFA President Gianni Infantino said he had no regrets. (Reuters)

if he felt FIFA had "lost control" of its own tournament because of the case of Artan and also Washington's decision to refuse visas for 15 members of the Iran team's support staff.

"In 2035 I think, we hope, the women's World Cup will be in the UK. Would you find it normal that FIFA would dictate to the British government who to let into the country and who not to let in the country. I don't know, maybe you find it normal?" Infantino asked.

Infantino called on the media to "chill and relax" - clarifying later that he did not mean to imply that FIFA was not doing anything about issues such as visas. "When I say chill, I do not mean chill and do nothing. I mean we are working," he said. "Our

world is a very aggressive world, security rules above everything."

Asked whether visa-related controversies had made him regret selecting the US as one of the host nations, Infantino said he had no regrets. "There are issues; it's normal for an event of this magnitude," he said. "Some come from the United States, some from Canada, some from Mexico. We deal with all of them."

The FIFA president also pointed to Iran's participation in the tournament as evidence of his organisation's efforts to navigate complex political circumstances. "People were saying Iran couldn't come to the World Cup," Infantino said. "I promised them they will come."

He said ensuring Iran's participation de-



Mexico's players take part in a training session in Mexico City, on the eve of their World Cup opening match against South Africa. (AFP)

spite geopolitical tensions demonstrated football's ability to bring people together.

The Swiss-Italian executive repeatedly returned to a message of unity, saying the World Cup could provide a welcome distraction at a time of global conflict and uncertainty. "When Iran plays, the stadium will be full and I hope there will be a positive atmosphere because this is football," he said. "We want to unite the world."

Infantino also defended FIFA's ticket pricing after criticism from some supporters who argued that the cost of attending matches had become prohibitive. FIFA has sold more than six million tickets for the tournament, which now has 48 teams, and demand had exceeded expectations by "a factor of 10 or more", he said.

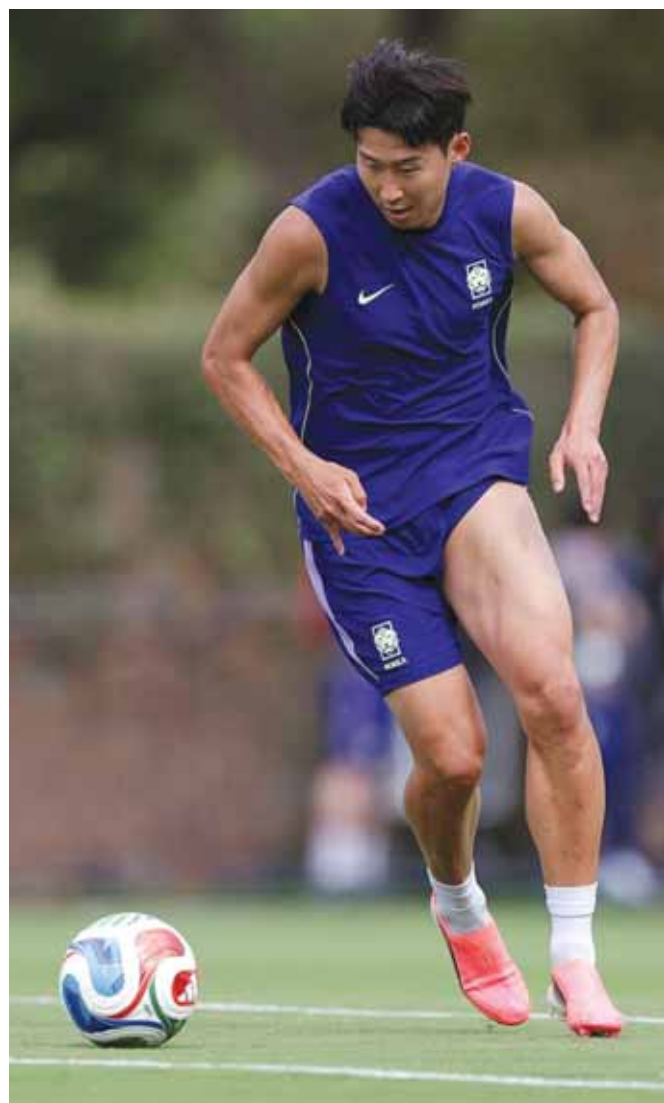
"The starting price at \$60 is the lowest entry price of any of the American sports in the playoff phases," Infantino said. "If you sell it at a lower price point, it would have gone on secondary markets at much higher prices. Every dollar that comes in goes back to the development of football."

The World Cup kicks off today at Mexico City's Estadio Azteca, which will become the first stadium to host matches at three men's World Cups, with Infantino predicting one of the most competitive tournaments in the events history.

The FIFA president said factors including altitude, climate, travel and the expanded format would add further unpredictability before concluding: "Let the celebration begin."

PREVIEW

Bae doubtful as South Korea face Czech



South Korea's skipper Son Heung-min trains in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Reuters
Guadalajara, Mexico

South Korea's Bae Jun-ho is unlikely to feature in his nation's World Cup opener against the Czech Republic in Guadalajara today as the midfielder continues to recover from an injury to his ankle sustained in a 5-0 win over Trinidad and Tobago 10 days ago.

The 22-year-old Stoke City playmaker missed his nation's 1-0 victory over El Salvador last Thursday and has trained on his own in an increasingly unlikely bid to be ready for South Korea's opening Group A clash against Miroslav Koubek's side.

Bae is one of the youngest players in coach Hong Myung-bo's squad and is expected to add a dash of youthful vigour to a line-up that laboured throughout Asia's preliminaries before securing their berth at an 11th consecutive World Cup.

The Koreans reached the last 16 in 2022, with Hwang Hee-chan scoring a stoppage time winner against Portugal to take his team into the knockout rounds and the Wolverhampton Wanderers forward is keen for a repeat performance at the upcoming tournament.

"If I can have another play like that, it will be great for myself and for our team," said Hwang, who will be appearing at his third World Cup. "I am working hard for a moment like that."

"Every match is important, but the first match is especially so." The Czechs enter the World Cup

riding a wave of confidence after six wins in qualification and friendly matches following a crisis late last year when they lost to the Faroe Islands.

That result marked the low point of a then-stuttering qualifying campaign and led to the appointment of 74-year-old Koubek, who guided the Czechs through the playoffs to their first World Cup appearance since 2006.

The Czechs will seek to impose their physicality on the South Koreans, potentially looking to two-metre Slavia Prague striker Tomas Chory who headed in a goal in the 3-1 tournament tune-up match against Guatemala on June 6.

Organisational discipline will feature heavily and is something Koubek believes will need to improve following some miscommunication during their 3-1 win over Guatemala.

"Some defensive solutions were not entirely decisive, that's true," Koubek told reporters after the match. "We should have been more assertive in the duels. There were some slip-ups."

The Czechs will hope Patrik Schick's goal against Guatemala means the Bayer Leverkusen striker and Euro 2020 joint top scorer has found form while Hoffenheim striker Adam Hlozek offers another experienced option up front.

Koubek will also lean on West Ham midfielder Tomas Soucek and 35-year-old Vladimir Darida - who earned a recall to the national team after impressing for Hradec Kralove in the Czech top tier this season - to provide experience and stability.

Emotional World Cup return to Mexico for South Africa coach Broos

Johannesburg: Forty years after playing for Belgium against hosts Mexico in the 1986 World Cup opener, Hugo Broos makes an emotional return to the Estadio Azteca today, this time as coach of South Africa.

The clash between Mexico and South Africa in Mexico City signals the start of the 2026 World Cup, the first of 104 matches that will end with the champions being crowned on July 19 in New Jersey.

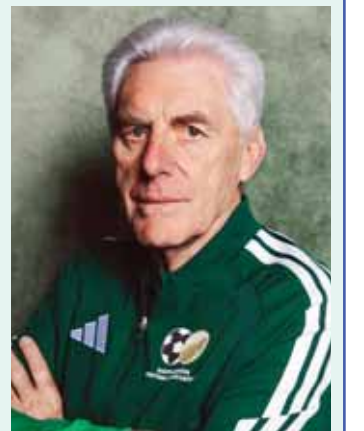
"No-one in Hollywood could have scripted it better - I played in a World Cup opener and now, four decades later, I will be one of the coaches in a World Cup opener," he said.

The 2026 World Cup, which Mexico, the United States and Canada are jointly hosting, signals the end of a 56-year football career for the Belgian, as a defender and a coach. "I am dreaming of a beautiful ending where South Africa reach the knockout phase of a World Cup for the first time after three first-round exits," he said.

"When South Africa bow out of this tournament, I will say goodbye to football. I turned 74 this year and the time has come to be with my wife, two daughters, son and eight grandchildren."

After Mexico, South Africa face the Czech Republic and South Korea in Group A. Group winners and runners-up advance automatically along with eight of the 12 third-placed nations. South Africa and Mexico also crossed paths in the opening match of the 2010 World Cup that South Africa hosted, in a game that finished 1-1.

Broos, who took charge in 2021,



said Mexico, and their fervent fans, would present a challenging start. "Mexico are a good, ambitious team which emphasises movement. Nothing other than our best level will suffice. We must know what to do when they have the ball, and when we have it," he said.

The Belgian veteran said he believes three points will be enough to reach the knockout round.

"Three points will take us through. The four (Group A) teams are not too different in terms of quality. That means there are three tough matches ahead for South Africa. Our mission is to create history by reaching the second round."

He played down suggestions that the fierce domestic rivalry between Sundowns and Pirates could spill into the squad. "There are no Sundowns or Pirates players in the squad. Only South Africans. The camaraderie is fantastic. Choosing players with the right mentality is a key part of my job."



CRICKET

England captain Stokes dropped for second Test

Veteran batsman and former skipper Joe Root to lead the side

Reuters
London

England captain Ben Stokes and bowler Gus Atkinson have both been left out of the second Test against New Zealand that starts next week following an investigation into an incident in a London nightclub, the ECB said yesterday.

Former skipper Joe Root will lead the team at The Oval in the absence of Stokes.

"The England & Wales Cricket Board can confirm that, given the ongoing investigation, Ben Stokes and Gus Atkinson have not been made available for selection for the second Test against New Zealand, which starts at the Kia Oval on Wednesday 17 June."

Stokes and pace bowler Atkinson broke the team's midnight curfew in the early hours of Monday morning and were reportedly present when a member of England's security staff was involved in an incident with a Saracens rugby player.

It is the latest incident to involve a member of the England team after vice-captain Harry Brook was punched by a bouncer outside a nightclub in Wellington in October on the eve of a one-day international against New Zealand.

During the Ashes series in Australia, videos also emerged on social media showing England players inebriated during a mini-break in the coastal town of Noosa.

Accusations of a "drinking culture" were played down by Rob Key, England's managing director of cricket, in March but the ECB have introduced a strict midnight curfew.

England enjoyed a 115-run victory in the first Test, with Atkinson taking five wickets in New Zealand's second innings, but that positive result has now been overshadowed by another embarrassing incident for the ECB.



England's Gus Atkinson (left) and England's captain Ben Stokes leave the field for lunch on the second day of the four day Test against Zimbabwe at Trent Bridge in Nottingham on May 23, 2025. Stokes and Atkinson have been dropped from the squad for next week's second Test against New Zealand. (AFP)

The Cricket Regulator - a separate body from the ECB - is also conducting an investigation, the ECB said.

Stokes' long-term future is now under a cloud, but former captain Michael Vaughan believes he should not be dismissed.

"Yes, Ben Stokes broke a curfew. Yes, he made a mistake. But is that a sacking offence as England's Test captain? I don't think so," Vaughan told the Daily Telegraph.

It is not the first time 35-year-old Stokes has found himself in trouble for off-field incidents.

In 2017, he was involved in a fracas outside a nightclub in

Bristol that led to a criminal trial, at which he was later found not guilty of affray. He missed the 2017-18 Ashes tour before being cleared the following summer.

The latest episode marks another setback for England, who faced intense scrutiny about their discipline after the 4-1 Ashes defeat by Australia.

It will also add renewed pressure on head coach Brendon McCullum, who retained his role across all formats in March following an ECB review, despite lingering concerns about the team's culture. With vice-captain Brook overlooked, Root will now lead the team, having done

so for a record 64 Tests between 2017 and 2022. The 35-year-old, who is England's all-time leading run-scorer, stepped down after a sequence of one win in 17 Tests and was succeeded by Stokes. Pace bowler Jofra Archer and batter Jordan Cox have been added to the England squad that won the first Test at Lord's.

England squad: Joe Root (captain), Rehan Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Sonny Baker, Shoaib Bashir, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Jordan Cox, Ben Duckett, Matthew Fisher, Emilio Gay, James Rew, Ollie Robinson, Jamie Smith, Josh Tongue.

COMMENT

Ashes hero Vaughan backs Stokes to stay on as England Test captain

AFP
London

Michael Vaughan has backed Ben Stokes to retain the England captaincy despite being investigated for breaking the team's curfew.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) announced they were looking into Stokes' involvement in a nightclub incident on Monday morning following England's win in the first Test against New Zealand at Lord's.

England team-mate Gus Atkinson and Saracens rugby player Tota Auvaa were also involved.

Media reports on Tuesday suggested Stokes may resign as Test skipper.

The second Test against New Zealand at the Oval gets under way in a week's time.

But former England captain Vaughan said Stokes had sufficient "credit in the bank" to avoid being sacked.

"Yes, Ben Stokes broke a curfew," Vaughan wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*.

"Yes, he made a mistake. But is that a sacking offence as England's Test captain? I do not think so.

"Stokes has a lot of credit in the bank for all he has done for England as captain and all-rounder. There is no way that those making the big decisions at the England and Wales Cricket Board have the same credit in the bank.

"I do not see how you can tell Stokes he is not captain anymore just for going over the curfew by a couple of hours after a win."

He added: "A short suspension would be fine, but this is not a big enough incident over which to lose the captaincy."

It is the latest controversy concerning the England team after the tour of Australia where the side faced allegations of a drinking culture during a 4-1 Ashes series loss.

A physical confrontation with Auvaa is understood to have led to a member of ECB security staff being struck.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Bransgrove steps down as Hampshire chairman after Indian takeover

AFP
London

Rod Bransgrove has stepped down from his role as Hampshire chairman, following the completion of the takeover by GMR Global, the English county cricket side announced yesterday.

The 76-year-old businessman saved the county from financial collapse when he bought the club in 2000, and led the move to the Rose Bowl from Hampshire's old Northlands Road headquarters in Southampton.

Bransgrove has long campaigned for the Rose Bowl to stage a Test against Australia and his dream will be realised during the 2027 Ashes in England.

GMR, who co-own Indian Premier League franchise Delhi Capitals, have now finalised the staged acquisition of the Hampshire Sport and Leisure Holdings Group, a

process that began in 2024.

GMR's Kiran Kumar Grandhi will take over from Bransgrove, who becomes honorary life president and a director on the board.

"This moment brings to a close a chapter that has meant more to me than words can express," said Bransgrove.

"What we have built at Hampshire has been a collective effort, driven by incredible people, loyal supporters and partners who believed in a shared vision."

He added: "I have immense pride in what we have achieved here and unequivocal confidence that, under GMR's full ownership, the club and venue are in the safest of hands. The future is incredibly exciting, and I will be watching closely."

Grandhi, meanwhile paid tribute to Bransgrove's "extraordinary leadership and vision", saying GMR were "excited to build on the remarkable legacy that has been established here, investing in long-term growth and innovation".

CYCLING

Breakaway king Simmons wins ahead of Tour buildup

AFP
Montrond-les-Bains, France

American champion Quinn Simmons of Lidl-Trek won stage four of the Tour Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes yesterday when a breakaway group made it home just ahead of a charging peloton at the thermal spa resort village of Montrond-les-Bains.

With his long red hair and beard and decked out in his stars and stripes US road champion jersey, Simmons has been a regular and easily recognisable feature in breakaway attempts, and this was his first win in France and third at World Tour level.

"You never know when your last chance to win in the national jersey is, you have to earn it back every year, and I'm so proud to race in it," said Simmons, whose escapes on the Tour de France last year brought him to public attention.

"(The peloton) only gave us two minutes. I was hoping for a bit more. It's been a year since I put my hands in the air, so it's pretty special. To have a confirmation that the form is there is nice. I've never won a sprint before," Simmons added.

The 25-year-old's efforts ended in a stage win after the peloton were bamboozled by a prolonged acceleration in the escape party who hit high speeds over the final kilometres.

"I've never won a sprint before, so that's pretty cool," said Simmons, who described the win as payback for his efforts training in



Lidl-Trek's US rider Quinn Simmons celebrates his victory on the podium after winning the 4th stage of the Tour Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes cycling race (formerly known as the Criterium du Dauphine), 167.4km between Le Puy-en-Velay and Montrond-les-Bains, central France, yesterday. (AFP)

Colorado. Also part of the break that formed on the second of six modest climbs along the 167km route was Finn Fisher-Black of Red Bull-Bora-Hansgrohe, who finished second, and third-placed Matteo Vercher of TotalEnergies.

Belgian Wout Van Aert won the sprint behind the break for fourth, just a few seconds adrift, while the overall leader's yellow jersey remains with Frenchman

Alex Baudin of EF Education-EasyPost.

Ineos Grenadiers pair Kevin Vauquelin and Oscar Onley are second and third at 12sec, while pre-race favourite Paul Seixas is 10th at 1min.

The race formerly known as the Criterium du Dauphine is one of the final stage events before the Tour de France and a major form indicator for the Grand Bou-

cle in July. Today's stage five is a relatively flat ride but at 195.8km is the longest on the eight-day race that culminates with a brutal Sunday finale over four giant peaks.

On the weekend, the race will end up the Plateau de Solaison in the French Alps, where a 11.3 kilometres climb at an average gradient of nine percent awaits any pretender to the title.

SPOTLIGHT

LA 2028 working to avoid repeat of World Cup visa issues: IOC

Reuters
Lausanne, Switzerland

Los Angeles Olympics organisers are working closely with the authorities to avoid a repeat of the visa complications and denials of entry faced by several stakeholders at the soccer World Cup co-hosted by the US, International Olympic Committee president Kirsty Coventry said yesterday.

"I am confident that in two years we will be able to overcome a number of the challenges that the World Cup is facing right now. But I think that also takes collaboration and learning," Coventry told a press conference in Lausanne after a meeting of the IOC's executive board. IOC sports director Pierre Ducrey said there were dedicated people in the organising committee working on the matter.

"They have an office in Washington, there is a strong relationship they are building with the authorities, with the right agencies that will have to be involved in this process," Ducrey said.

"I think it's also a lot about explaining who is going to be coming, the profile of the people, the role they have to play so that we can also spend a lot of time educating the agencies and make sure we are all on the same page regarding what is going to happen in 2028."

Visa issues have already arisen at the World Cup, which begins today in the US, Canada and Mexico. The Iranian team had to move their training base from Arizona to Mexico and will be allowed to enter the US only a day before

each of their three matches, and a Somali referee was denied entry into the US days before the event kicks off.

IOC BOARD BACKS SKI MOUNTAINEERING AT 2030 WINTER GAMES

At the Lausanne meeting, the IOC's executive board approved a proposal to add ski mountaineering, which made its debut at the Milano Cortina Olympics in February, to the 2030 Winter Games in the French Alps.

"The French Alps organising committee proposed... to add ski mountaineering to the 2030 Winter Olympic programme edition. The (executive board) has decided to approve this and will put that forward to our session in two weeks," Coventry said.

The board also decided not to include "crossover sports" such as cyclocross at the 2030 Games, but left open the door for the future.

"We decided, very clear, for the upcoming Winter Olympics that we would like to keep the identity of winter sports of snow and ice... no crossover at the moment. It could be in the future," said Karl Stoss, chair of the Olympic programme working group.



Ceremonial lighting of the cauldron ahead of ticket registration launch at the LA Memorial Coliseum, on January 13, 2026. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Eight Arab teams at WC 'true honour' for regional football

Former Qatar goalkeeper Khalil credits region's record presence at World Cup as a direct legacy of Qatar 2022

The FIFA World Cup 2026 will represent a key milestone for Arab football, with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia all set to compete, marking the largest Arab presence in the tournament's history.

Co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico from 11 June to 19 July, this edition will feature an expanded 48-team format for the first time.

For former Qatar national team goalkeeper **Ahmed Khalil**, the qualification of eight Arab teams to the FIFA World Cup 2026 stands as a testament to the remarkable progress of football across the region.

In an interview with the Local Organising Committee for Football Events, Khalil said: "Having eight Arab teams at the World

Cup is a true honour for regional football. But I hope it doesn't stay a matter of participation alone. I want to see every one of these teams go into their groups and succeed."

Khalil, who played for many years with the Qatar national team, believes the achievement reflects more than a single qualifying campaign: "The standard of play has risen, the administrative structures have matured and financial support has grown considerably. Eight teams reaching this stage is evidence of a system working as a whole: officials, federations and technical staff alike."

Khalil pointed to Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 as the decisive turning point for regional football, a tournament that proved the region could deliver the sport's biggest event and saw Morocco become the first

Arab and African side to reach the semi-finals.

He added: "Qatar showcased this region's ability to host the world at the very highest of standards, its rich football culture and flourishing talent. The progress these teams have made since 2022 is no coincidence. It is a direct result of that experience."

On Qatar's prospects at the tournament, Khalil expressed confidence that Al Annabi will perform in a way that reflects their status as Asian champions, noting that teamwork, determination and national pride carry as much weight as technical ability at this level of the game.

Looking further ahead, he urged the region to build on this momentum, expressing hope that participation in 2026 would help establish Arab teams as serious contenders on the world stage

and create wider opportunities for generations to come. Alongside Al Annabi's participation, Qatar's contribution to the FIFA World Cup 2026 extends through a deployment programme established under a knowledge and expertise transfer Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) and FIFA.

Under the agreement, a dedicated team of SC experts has been seconded to several host cities across the United States and Canada to share the human capital, expertise and institutional knowledge gained from hosting Qatar 2022 and subsequent mega-events. Later this year, Qatar will welcome the world once more as host of the FIFA U-17 World Cup, from 19 November to 13 December, the second of five consecutive editions to be staged in Doha.



PREVIEW

Canada's dreams face first test as injury-hit hosts meet Bosnia

Reuters
Toronto

Canada will carry immense pressure into their World Cup opener when, in perhaps the most seminal moment in the country's soccer history, they face Bosnia and Herzegovina tomorrow in front of a partisan home crowd with both teams seeking a first-ever knockout stage berth.

Canada's quest for respectability on the global stage has been nothing short of painful, and six defeats from six matches across the 1986 and 2022 tournaments tell the story of a nation still searching for its World Cup identity.

But coach Jesse Marsch's revolution has injected fresh belief into a program that, less than two months after he took over in May 2024, advanced to the semi-finals in their Copa America debut before being sent home by reigning World Cup champions Argentina.

Marsch's blueprint for World Cup success has hit an early snag, however, with a mounting injury list threatening to derail Canada's

golden opportunity to thrust soccer further into the mainstream of the country's sporting and cultural landscape.

Captain Alphonso Davies, who scored Canada's first-ever goal at a World Cup, will watch the Group B opener from the sidelines at Toronto Stadium with a hamstring injury suffered during Bayern Munich's Champions League semi-final last month.

The Davies blow is compounded by the loss of Marcelo Flores, the Mexico-turned-Canada midfielder whose switch of allegiance was seen as a coup for the World Cup co-hosts. A knee injury suffered in May has ruled Flores out entirely, while defender Moise Bombito's recovery from a broken leg appears to have stalled after lasting just 30 minutes in a warm-up against Uzbekistan.

With Davies expected back for group stage clashes against Qatar and Switzerland, the burden of carrying Canadian hopes falls largely on Jonathan David, the nation's all-time leading scorer with 39 goals, who must spearhead an attack desperate to end years of World Cup frustration.

Maxime Crepeau, who last

week was named Canada's starting goalkeeper, will finally get his World Cup moment after missing the 2022 edition with a broken leg suffered during the MLS Cup Final 15 days before that year's tournament kicked off in Qatar.

Standing in Canada's way right out of the gate is a first-time meeting with Bosnia's battle-hardened Dragons, who are back on the biggest stage after their penalty shootout heroics against four-time champions Italy secured a second World Cup appearance.

Veteran striker Edin Dzeko, one of only two remaining players from Bosnia's debut World Cup appearance in 2014, will be captain and father figure to a youthful squad who are being tipped to make a big impression at the tournament. The vast experience of Dzeko, Bosnia's all-time leading goalscorer by a considerable margin and one of a World Cup-record eight players aged 40 or older selected to play at the tournament, will be crucial in the team's bid to escape the group.

Defender Sead Kolasinac is the only other returning member from the country's last World Cup appearance.

SPOTLIGHT

'I'll be at next World Cup' in 2030: Somali referee barred from US



Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan waves to supporters while draped in the Somali flag as he is welcomed ahead of a solidarity match after returning to Somalia in Mogadishu yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Mogadishu

Somali referee Omar Artan, who was denied entry to the United States for the World Cup, returned to a hero's welcome in Mogadishu and vowed to take part in the next tournament in 2030.

Thousands turned out to support him at Mogadishu's national stadium, chanting "Victory to Omar, Victory to Somalia!" as he was hoisted onto supporters' shoulders to wave, Somalia's national flag draped over his shoulders and a grin across his face.

"I will be at the next World Cup and will continue to make Somalia proud... Despite what has happened to me, I am not discouraged," Artan told journalists earlier at the city's main airport, as crowds waved national flags.

Artan's rejection has sparked outrage at home. "They wronged him in a way that hurts every-

body that is concerned about humanity," Mohamed Said, a Mogadishu government official, said at the airport.

In a statement, the ministry of foreign affairs said it would "continue engaging with relevant partners to seek further clarification regarding this matter and to safeguard the dignity and rights of its citizens".

Artan, who in 2025 was named men's referee of the year by the Confederation of African Football (CAF), was barred from entering the US on Saturday after arriving at Miami International Airport. A US State Department official said late Tuesday that the referee was "associated with suspected members of terrorist organizations", therefore "making the traveler ineligible for admission to the United States".

FIFA also confirmed that he would no longer be part of the World Cup. Artan's appointment to the 52-strong roster of referees for the finals in Canada, Mexico and the United States had been a huge source of pride

for his compatriots.

The government had urged people to turn up to Mogadishu stadium to show their support. By late afternoon the arena was packed with Somalis - bedecked in Somalia's national colours of blue and white -- who bounded to their feet, applauding wildly, and chanted Artan's name.

"We share the pain and frustration experienced by referee Omar as a result of the difficulties he has faced," Ciise Aden Abshir, a senior advisor to the sports ministry, said. National referee Sayid Ali said the incident had affected them all deeply, telling AFP: "There is nothing in Omar's professional record that could justify preventing him from carrying out his duties."

Mustafa Mahad called the US decision "unjust", and said he had travelled to the stadium to show his support. While he thanked FIFA for their support, he echoed wider sentiments when he told AFP that "many of us feel that more could have been done".



Canada's has lost all six matches across the 1986 and 2022 World Cup.

GASCOIGNE URGES ENGLAND TO REPLICATE 1990 SPIRIT AT WORLD CUP

Paul Gascoigne said yesterday he hopes England can reproduce the same "unbelievable" team spirit as the squad at the 1990 World Cup during their quest for glory at this year's tournament. The former midfielder was a key member of Bobby Robson's team which reached the semi-finals in Italy before losing on penalties to eventual champions West Germany. England have won the World Cup just once, on home soil 60 years ago, and the only time they have reached the semi-finals since 1990 was when Gareth Southgate's side made it through to the last four in 2018. "You want 11 captains on the pitch and when you are playing in a game like that, at a World Cup, you cannot afford to carry anyone," Gascoigne told ITV. "Everyone has to be on the ball and the team spirit is important. The players that didn't play, they were right behind the team, so our team spirit was unbelievable. "The most important thing is team spirit because that goes a long way." Thomas Tuchel's men face Costa Rica in their final

friendly before a Group L opener against Croatia in Dallas on June 17. When asked what he would say to the current squad, the 59-year-old Gascoigne added: "Enjoy it. Because you just never know it could be your last World Cup." Gascoigne famously burst into tears after being booked in the 1990 semi-final meaning he would have been suspended from the final had England qualified. His life has been blighted by addiction problems but Gascoigne, speaking following the publication of his new autobiography, said: "Everything's going well for us. It's probably the happiest I've been in about five years, definitely, you know." Turning to his autobiography, he said: "A lot of people have come up (to me) and said they've read it and (it's) saved their life. If that book can save one person's life, then I've done my job," with Gascoigne joking: "I think I should read it myself, you know! Do myself a favour." He added: "Every morning, I don't think about tomorrow because that's another day. I just try to keep it in the day, keep it simple. Some days I find it hard."



England's Harry Kane walks on the pitch before their friendly against Costa Rica in Orlando yesterday. (Reuters)



SPOTLIGHT

Messi sparkles on return from injury

Argentina captain is set to feature in his sixth World Cup

AFP
Auburn, United States

Lionel Messi scored within minutes of making his return from an injury scare as Argentina beat Iceland 3-0 in their final World Cup warm-up in Auburn, Alabama on Tuesday.

Messi started on the bench as the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner is eased back to fitness after exiting Inter Miami's 6-4 win over Philadelphia with muscle fatigue on May 24. He was joined on the sidelines at the start by Julian Alvarez, Enzo Fernandez and Alexis Mac Allister as Lionel Scaloni named an experimental line-up in front of an 88,000 capacity crowd.

Messi is set to feature in his sixth World Cup and allayed fears he may not be ready for the start of the tournament in a supreme 20-minute cameo. Argentina begin their defence of the World Cup against Algeria on June 16 before also facing Austria and Jordan in Group J.

Iceland should have taken the lead inside the first few minutes when Mikael Egill Ellertsson blasted over with the goal gaping. Instead the three-time world champions took an early lead.

Iceland could only partially clear a goalmouth scramble inside their box and the ball broke to Strasbourg defender Valentin Barco to fire into the bottom corner.

Nico Paz failed to make the most of his chance to shine in Messi's absence and wasted a big chance to make it 2-0 before half-time when his powerful hit was repelled by the face of Iceland goalkeeper Elias Olafsson.

Fernandez and Mac Allister were introduced among five Argentine changes at the break. Lautaro Martinez was another to make his entrance at half-time and twice hit the post when he should have doubled Argentina's advantage.

The expectant crowd had to wait until the final quarter for Messi to make his appearance. With his first involvement, Messi's brilliant pass played in Martinez, who was wiped out by



Lionel Messi converts penalty against Iceland during a World Cup warm-up game to become Argentina's oldest goalscorer at the age of 38 years and 11 months, two months older than Angel Labruna, who had held the previous record since 1957. (AFP)

Olafsson as he chipped the ball wide.

Messi made no mistake by slotting in his 117th international goal on his 199th cap. He became Argentina's oldest goalscorer at the age of 38 years and 11 months, two months older than Angel Labruna, who had held the previous record since 1957.

Messi was involved again for Argentina's third goal as Messi's pass fed Rodrigo De Paul, who squared for Thiago Almada to tap in. "I'm happy, savouring every moment and excited as ever," said Messi ahead of his record sixth World Cup appearance.

ARGENTINA PLAYERS' PASSPORT DETAILS LEAKED IN SECURITY OVERSIGHT

A security oversight leaked the passport details of every player in the Argentina squad before the friendly against Iceland, including Messi, media reports said.

The passport numbers, listed on the official team sheet, should have been blurred before being released to the media and the public. But in Alabama's Jordan-Hare Stadium, they were circulated without redaction.

Argentina football federation did not comment on the gaffe.

FOCUS

Tuchel says England not favourites but can dare to dream

Reuters
Florida

England manager Thomas Tuchel does not rank his team among the favourites for the World Cup but believes they are in good shape heading into the tournament and can "dare to dream" about lifting the trophy.

Most bookmakers have England among the leading title contenders but Tuchel reckons the six-decade drought since the nation's solitary triumph in 1966 counts against them.

The German likened England's quest at the June 11 to July 19 tournament to a player without a previous title turning up at the Wimbledon tennis championships. "We're not the top favourites. We can't be, because we haven't won it for so, so many years," he told reporters.

"There are proven winners in the tournament with more success in recent tournaments. So, these are the favourites, and we compete for the trophy. It's just like if you ... go to Wimbledon, you have never won it ... (you're) not the favourite. But you can win it, of course, and we want to win it, but we know what it takes, and it takes also a calm mindset and focus on our steps."

Tuchel is taking charge of a team at the World Cup for the first time but said his experience of Champions League campaigns in club football had taught him a lot about how to approach tournament football.

"It is my opinion and my conviction that once you reach the quarter-finals, you can go all the way," he added. "I think it's important not to try to digest this

whole tournament in one piece, and to focus on what we can influence. At the moment, this is prep camp and then we will take care of the group stage.

"Make sure that you go through your group, and don't get distracted by overthinking. Once you (are) in a quarter-final, then you can go all the way and then the belief will be there, but there has to be a lot of work done. We're exactly where we want to be and want to take the next step tomorrow."

England kick off their campaign on June 17 in Dallas with a repeat of their 2018 World Cup semi-final against Croatia. Tuchel said his qualification of England's chances did not reflect any doubts in his own mind, or in the camp, about the potential of the squad.

"I have belief. We all have belief," he said. "We all have a dream, but it comes with responsibility and hard work and commitment and discipline, and sometimes it comes with disappointment and setbacks. This is all included, but ... we dare to dream and it's important."

ENGLAND'S FRIENDLY AGAINST COSTA RICA DELAYED BY STORM

England's final World Cup warm-up friendly against Costa Rica was delayed yesterday after a heavy thunderstorm hit Orlando. Torrential rain and lightning left the pitch at the Inter&Co Stadium heavily waterlogged ahead of the planned 4pm kick-off time.

Delays were prominent feature of the Club World Cup in the United States 12 months ago and could have a major impact on the largest ever World Cup, which begins today.



England manager Thomas Tuchel is all smiles during a press conference in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, US. (Reuters)

Iran threatens to stop games if faced with unauthorised flags or slogans

Tehran: Iran threatened to halt its matches at the World Cup if unauthorised flags are displayed or slogans targeting the national team are chanted at stadiums, Iranian media reported, citing Sports Minister Ahmad Donyamali, following criticism of the team's presence at the tournament.

The World Cup begins today, with Iran opening their Group G campaign against New Zealand in Los Angeles on June 15. They next face Belgium at the same venue on June 21 before taking on Egypt in Seattle on June 26.

"We have informed FIFA that if unofficial flags are brought or slogans against the national team are chanted in the stadiums where Iran plays in the World Cup, the team manager will definitely be responsible for stopping the

match," Donyamali said on Tuesday, according to Iranian media.

"We have been assured that no disruptive incidents will occur in the stadium during the match against Egypt."

In April, protesters gathered outside the FIFA Congress in Vancouver called for Iran to be banned from the tournament, saying the team represents the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps rather than the Iranian people.

The Iranian team has also faced organisational challenges, with its football federation saying its ticket allocation was withdrawn days before the tournament, leaving supporters who had already made travel plans unable to attend their team's matches.

The team, currently training in Tijuana,

Mexico, will be able to enter the US the day before each match, the Department of Homeland Security said, amid a conflict that has added a geopolitical dimension to the tournament.

While the players obtained the visas necessary to enter the United States, 15 members of their support team in management and administrative roles did not receive them.

"In accordance with FIFA's programme, the team delegation will travel to the United States on a charter flight," the Iranian federation's spokesperson Amir Mehdi Alavi said in a statement carried by Iran's ISNA news agency. "The team will travel to the host city one day before the match against New Zealand, and for the following two matches, we will be at the host venue two days before the game," he added.

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