

## France, Argentina jet to Qatar

AFP, Doha

Argentine superstar Lionel Messi was due to jet into Qatar on Wednesday hoping to crown his glorious career by lifting the World Cup trophy as defending champions France also prepared to join the party.

Messi, 35, has a sackful of trophies but the tournament in Qatar is likely to be his final chance to equal the achievement of fellow Argentine great Diego Maradona, a winner in 1986.

Two-time champions Argentina are playing a friendly against Abu Dhabi on Wednesday, hoping to extend their unbeaten run to 36 matches.

But Paris Saint-Germain forward Messi is cautious about the team's chances in Qatar, even though they are among the favourites.

"We are very excited," the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner said in an interview with CONMEBOL, the South American football federation.

"We have a very nice group that is very eager, but we think about going little by little. We know that World Cup groups are not easy."

Argentina launch their campaign against Saudi Arabia on November 22, with Mexico and Poland also in their group.

Coach Lionel Scaloni has tried to reduce the pressure on his team, who ended a 28-year trophy drought at last year's Copa America and are ranked third in the world.

"We're conscious what football represents for Argentina but it's sport and that's why we have to step on the pitch and do our own thing," he said.

"We have to come out and play the way we know how to. And then there are a lot of unknowns."

France were also due to arrive in Doha on Wednesday, seeking to become the first team to retain the World Cup since Brazil in 1962.

Ten members of the 2018 title-winning squad return, including captain Hugo Lloris, Kylian Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann.

But the defending champions, grouped with Australia, Denmark and Tunisia, are without first-choice midfielder Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante.

Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema, who has missed a series of games for Real Madrid this season because of injury, is set for his first World Cup appearance since 2014.

Benzema was frozen out of the France team for more than five years due to his role in a blackmail scandal involving a sextape and his international teammate Mathieu Valbuena.

England and the Netherlands became the first European heavyweights to touch down in Qatar on Tuesday.

England supporters from India outnumbered fans from England nearly 10 to one as Gareth Southgate's team rolled into their World Cup base.

As the team bus pulled up at their hotel, drums were beaten and horns blasted by Indian fans proudly wearing England shirts and carrying England flags.

Conversation as the supporters waited was dominated by reports in the British and French media that they were "fake fans".

Sajidh, 29, said Indian football fans in Qatar had been "outraged" by reports suggesting they had been paid to wear the shirts of World Cup nations when thousands took part in a march along the Doha seafront last week.

"It is purely fake news and I would like to say loud and clear that none of us have been paid in any way," added Sajidh, who gave only one name.

"We are diehard England fans."

World Cup organisers weighed in on the issue on Wednesday, saying supporters from across the world had contributed to the local atmosphere.

"Numerous journalists and commentators on social media have questioned whether these are 'real fans,' they said in a statement.

"We thoroughly reject these assertions, which are both disappointing and unsurprising."

The build-up to the tournament in Qatar has been dominated by concerns over Qatar's treatment of migrant workers, women and the LGBTQ community.

Pleas from football's world governing body FIFA for a switch in focus to the football have fallen on deaf ears in some countries.



Football fever in Bangladesh surrounding the upcoming FIFA World Cup escalates at a rapid pace, as evident in Baludiar, a remote village in Pabna, which saw die-hard supporters of Argentina descend on the streets while parading with a 600-foot long flag of their favourite team on Tuesday. [Inset] A section of the crowd enjoy a friendly match played between Brazil and Argentina supporters at the Tilgaon Railway Station ground in Sylhet's Moulvibazar yesterday. AHK TOPU/MINTU DESHWARA

## Alcaraz to finish year at No. 1

REUTERS, Turin

Rafa Nadal was eliminated from the ATP Finals as Casper Ruud beat American Taylor Fritz in their round-robin match in Turin on Tuesday, which also guaranteed that teenager Carlos Alcaraz would end the year as world number one.

Spaniard Nadal needed to win the tournament to take the rankings top spot from compatriot Alcaraz, but straight-set losses to Fritz on Sunday and Felix Auger-Aliassime earlier on Tuesday left him needing Ruud to lose in straight sets to keep his hopes alive.

The Norwegian, however, won the first set 6-3 against Fritz, capitalising on his much improved serve.

The 19-year-old Alcaraz, who is not competing at the tournament due to an abdominal injury, will be confirmed as the youngest year-end number one since the ATP rankings began in 1973.

Although eliminated, Nadal will still play Ruud in the night match on Thursday.

## Rangpur find 'new way' to clinch NCL

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Rangpur overcame the Sylhet pacers' fiery spells and exerted their will in what was a virtual final to pick up a five-wicket win at the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogura yesterday, clinching their second National Cricket League (NCL) trophy.

The Akbar Ali-led side had to battle preconceptions en route as they contended with both specific and varying challenges in the newly revamped.

The Rangpur skipper said they applied themselves in a new way to best tackle the challenges, which came in the form of both the conditions and the Duke ball being used in Bangladesh's domestic cricket for the very first time. Increased match fees meant more competitiveness and eagerness to do well.

The tables turned from bat being the aggressor to the ball holding sway. Three at slip cordon for an entire day's play or even an entire session was unheard of in Bangladesh's domestic circuit, but that became the norm this NCL. Runs dried up as bowlers dominated extensively but while spinners had been the major wicket-takers in previous editions, pace finally came to the fore.

To meet the challenges, Akbar's side found new ways. In their first game, they were bowled out for

73 in the first innings but Musfik bagged eight wickets in the second innings to get his side a win. When talking about a new way, it was about adapting positively.

"We didn't lose hope, we knew it would be about scoring runs in the end and we tried to go into a one-day mode and remain positive," Akbar said.

When the chance arrived to score runs, youngster Abdullah Al Mamun hit an unbeaten 210 at Sylhet in a drawn game and contributions from youngsters like him and Musfik egged the team on. Mamun scored 326 runs in five matches while Musfik was amongst the top five wicket-takers with 25 scalps to his name.

"He [Musfik] was our main bowler and the way he bowled, playing all six matches, proved how fit he is. Mamun and Mushfiq both came after playing the 2022 U-19 World Cup. But how they integrated with the team and the way they became the main players was an incredible boost for us. They brought new energy into the team," their skipper said.

Akbar praised his side for playing like it was a 'family' and sticking together but more importantly his side enjoyed the challenges.

At the conclusion of the NCL, Chattogram Division will be relegated from Tier-1 to Tier-2 while Dhaka Metropolis will be promoted to the top tier.



## Cornelius treble propels Sk Jamal

SPORTS REPORTER

Stewart Cornelius made a point in his first match in Bangladesh, as the Saint Vincent native netted a memorable hat-trick against BFF Elite Academy to guide Sheikh Jamal to a 3-0 win in Group D of the Independence Cup at the Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla yesterday.

Sheikh Jamal made light work of the BFF Academy, a team without foreigners, before taking the lead in the 11th minute. Cornelius easily got the decisive touch after a long throw was allowed to bounce in front of the goalpost.

In the 28th minute, it was again Cornelius who got on the end a through pass, raced into box and placed the ball to the far post to double the lead.

Sheikh Jamal wrapped up the victory in the 66th minute when Gambia's Suleymane Sillah found former Maziya SR&C forward Cornelius in the middle of the box with a cutback.

At the Shaheed Flight Lt Matiur Rahman Stadium in Munshiganj, Bangladesh Police thrashed Rahmtganj 4-1 in the other Group D match.

Police FC killed the game after scoring three goals in the first 16 minutes through Joyonto Kumar Roy's strike and MS Bablu's brace.

Rahmtganj pulled one back through Mohammad Abdullah's penalty before Isa Faisal sealed a win in the 88th minute.



Respective captains of the finalists -- Acme Chattogram's Rezaul Karim Babu (L) and Monarch Padma's Imran Hasan Pintu -- pose with the trophy of the Hockey Champions Trophy Bangladesh at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday, ahead of the country's maiden franchise-based hockey tournament's title-decider to be played at 6:30 pm today. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## U-19s win first Youth T20 in Multan

SPORTS REPORTER

Tanveer Ahmed's three wickets and an unbeaten 41 from Shihab James helped Bangladesh Under-19 clinch a five-wicket win and take a lead in the two-match series over Pakistan in the first Youth T20 at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday.

Bangladesh managed to restrict Pakistan to 143 for eight, with Tanveer being the highest wicket-taker for the Young Tigers. The right arm seamer ended with the figures of three for 25 in three overs while Mahfuzur Rahman Rabby bagged two for Bangladesh.

In the end, Bangladesh got over the line with three balls to spare. The second and final T20I will take place tomorrow at the same venue.

## 'Eng may not be at best for Aus ODIs'

REUTERS, Melbourne

England captain Jos Buttler said his team may struggle to fire up for the ODI series against Australia after only a few days' rest in the wake of their T20 World Cup triumph.

England, who beat Pakistan in the final in Melbourne on Sunday, meet Australia at Adelide Oval on Thursday in the first of three one-dayers, a series with nothing major at stake for either team.

"It's going to be a challenge," white-ball skipper Buttler told reporters on Wednesday.

"There's no point saying all the right things, that we'll be at our best."

England now hold both global limited-overs trophies, having won the 50-over World Cup on home soil in 2019, but their dominance does not guarantee enthusiasm for more cricket at the end of a long tour of Australia.

All-rounder Moeen Ali said it was "horrible" to have another game so soon after Sunday's final.

Australia are fresher than England after missing out on the semi-finals at their home T20 World Cup.

Australia's new ODI captain Pat Cummins said he expected England would still be up for the contest.

"They'll be strong no doubt, even if a bit tired," he told reporters. "We feel like we probably didn't play as well as we know we can (at the World Cup) so here's an opportunity straight away to play against the best. It's great."

