



# Saudi superfan awaits WC at 'home'

**AFP, Jeddah**

For the past two decades, Bader Turkistani has criss-crossed the globe to cheer on the Saudi national football team, leading crowds in poetic chants that have made him a social media star.

This year's World Cup in neighbouring Qatar, by contrast, has the feel of a home game: Doha is a mere two-hour flight from his base in Jeddah, on the Red Sea coast.

The close proximity has Turkistans dreaming of a ferocious turnout by football-mad Saudis, the kind of support he says could help the Green Falcons break out of the group stage for the first time in nearly three decades.

"The Saudi national team is considered to be playing on its land, playing among its fans. Having the World Cup in Qatar is like having it in Saudi Arabia," the 37-year-old engineer told AFP.

"A simple border separates us... We



will be present in very large numbers and fill the stadiums with 50,000 to 60,000 fans."

On a recent afternoon, wearing a white-and-green scarf over his traditional white thobe, Turkistani gave a preview of some of the chants he hopes will propel the Green Falcons to glory.

"This is the green of Saudi," he sang into an electronic megaphone, as a friend pounded a drum made of animal hide. "Oh Saudi, we have come."

The stands of the Jeddah stadium behind him were empty, but he is certain the scene will be completely different once play gets underway.

"50,000 fans will repeat this chant behind me in Qatar, instead of only 5,000 fans in Russia," he said.

"This enthusiasm is transmitted to the players... We hope that we, as fans, will bring out the players' best energy."

In total, Turkistani estimates he has watched more than 100 international matches played by the Green Falcons over the years, most of them documented in a bulging photo album he eagerly shows off to visitors. He also leads the fan association for the prestigious Jeddah-based Saudi club Al Ahly.

Beyond its high cost, the hobby can be trying in other ways: while on the road, Turkistani has struggled with language barriers, fiercely cold weather and unfamiliar foreign food. "In Qatar, all these things will be very convenient for us," he said.

Once Saudi fans are on Qatari soil, Turkistani will be ready for them, having stocked up on green-and-white t-shirts, plastic blowhorns, drums and balloons to distribute.

A group of Brazilian national football team players are captured in motion during a training session. They are wearing light blue long-sleeved training tops with the Brazilian crest and 'Flamengo' branding, paired with dark blue shorts. The players are running across a lush green grass field. In the background, a yellow wall with large green letters 'A BOLA' is visible, along with some red and white equipment boxes. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor daytime setting.

Brazil team are currently undergoing a five-day training camp at Juventus' training facilities in Turin from where they will be flying to Doha on Saturday for the upcoming World Cup in Qatar. Brazil open their World Cup Group G campaign against Serbia on November 24 before facing Switzerland and Cameroon.

PHOTO: TWITTER

# 2014 finalists land in Qatar

## AGENCIES

Four-time winners Germany arrived at the World Cup in Qatar on Thursday after Argentina superstar Lionel Messi touched down to launch his final bid to win football's biggest prize.

After a 1-0 win in a low-key warmup game against Oman the night before, the Germans, led by captain and goalkeeper Manuel Meuer, flew into Doha.

Germany are aiming to erase the nightmare of the 2018 tournament in Russia when they crashed out of the World Cup in the group stage after winning it four years earlier.

Team official Oliver Bierhoff explained why they had opted for the seclusion of a hotel in Al-Ruwais, an hour and half from the capital.

"We want to develop a team spirit there that will carry us through the tournament -- and for as long as possible."

Messi landed with the Argentina squad in the early hours of the morning from Abu Dhabi where he scored in a straightforward 5-0 win against the United Arab Emirates in front of 36,000 spectators on Wednesday.

It was his 91st international goal for the 1978 and 1986 World Cup winners who extended their unbeaten run to 36 matches.

The tournament is likely to be the final chance for 35-year-old Messi to emulate fellow Argentine great Diego Maradona in leading his country to World Cup glory.

The South Americans begin their campaign on Tuesday against Saudi Arabia in Group C, which also includes Mexico and Poland.

Argentina's 26-man squad could



change with less than a week to go before their World Cup opener as some players are not fully fit, coach Lionel Scaloni said on Wednesday after their 5-0 friendly win over the United Arab Emirates.

Defender Cristian Romero and forwards Nicolas Gonzalez, Alejandro Gomez and Paulo Dybala were left out for Argentina's last warm-up match in Abu Dhabi, with all four recovering after feeling "some discomfort", the coach said.

"We have a few problems, we have days to decide on the list ... We can change, hopefully not, but there is a possibility," Scaloni told reporters.

"I'm not saying they are going to be dropped from the list. There are players who are not well, who have been left out of the squad today because they were not fit to play or there was a risk.

"We have to be cautious because there



is a reason why they were left out.”

FIFA rules say that the World Cup teams can replace players in their squads who are injured or ill up to 24 hours before their opening match.

France arrived 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 are in the squad, including captain Hugo Lloris, Kylian Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann.

But the defending champions, grouped with Australia, Denmark and Tunisia, are without first-choice midfield pair 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.

“I’m telling everyone I’m supporting both, definitely. I can’t lose.” Prince of Wales, Prince William, on Wednesday promised Welsh lawmakers he would be cheering for both Wales and England in the World Cup in Qatar.

“It’s something we want to take on board as quickly as possible and something we want to enjoy. So we’re going out there to embrace it ... I enjoy playing in the sun, we don’t get it so often back home, do we?” said England defender Conor Coady, adding that there was no point in “over-thinking” about the heat in Qatar as it would get them nowhere during the tournament.

“We want to show how big Wales as a nation can be and show how good we are,” said Wales defender Ethan Ampadu.

“I don’t think people are underestimating us. I don’t think we’re among the top teams but we’re a very good team and we can compete with anybody. Of course, we’re not favourites, but I think nobody wants to meet us. I think among the big teams, nobody wants to go up against us,” said Danish young playmaker Mikkel Damsgaard.



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