

Infantino lambasts World Cup ‘hypocrites’

AFP, Doha

Two weeks after FIFA urged the 32 teams at the World Cup to “focus on the football”, Gianni Infantino veered off-script on Saturday.

Nothing was off limits as the most powerful man in football vented his frustration in a 1hr 1min tirade that encompassed 3,000 years of history, the evils of colonialism, childhood bullying and freckles.

The build-up to the World Cup in Qatar has been dominated by years of controversy focusing on the host nation’s treatment of migrant workers and record on human rights.

“Today I have strong feelings. Today I feel Qatari. Today I feel Arab. Today I feel African. Today I feel gay. Today I feel disabled. Today I feel a migrant worker,”

Infantino said in his opening remarks.

“I feel this, all this, because what I’ve been seeing and what I’ve been told, since I don’t read, otherwise I would be depressed, I think.”

Infantino then linked criticism of Qatar’s treatment of migrant workers to his own experiences as the son of Italian immigrants to Switzerland.

“What I’ve seen brings me back to my personal story. I am a son of migrant workers. My parents were working very, very hard in difficult situations.

“Of course I am not Qatari, I am not an Arab, I am not African, I am not gay, I am not disabled. But I feel like it, because I know what it means to be discriminated against as a foreigner in a foreign country.

“As a child I was bullied – because I had red hair and freckles, plus I was Italian so imagine. What do you do then? You try to engage, make friends. Don’t start accusing, fighting, insulting, you start engaging.

Infantino contrasted Qatar’s recruitment of foreign workers to European attitudes towards immigration, citing the deaths of an estimated 25,000 people trying to enter Europe across the Mediterranean since 2014.

“We have been taught many lessons from Europeans and the Western world. I am a European and for what we have been doing for 3,000 years around the world, we should be apologising for the next 3,000 years before giving moral lessons,” Infantino said.

“This one-sided moral lesson is just hypocrisy...I don’t want to give you any lessons of life, but what is going on here is profoundly, profoundly unjust.”



A brand new chapter in Qatar’s footballing history will be penned on Sunday when the middle eastern nation will set foot onto the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor to play their first-ever World Cup game, against Ecuador, kicking off the FIFA World Cup 2022 campaign in the process.

PHOTO: TWITTER

Qatar ready for HISTORIC MOMENT

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Qatar coach Felix Sanchez said the hosts were excitedly looking forward to a “historic moment” when his team open the 2022 World Cup against Ecuador on Sunday.

The Qataris, playing in their first World Cup, take on the South Americans at Al Bayt Stadium in the tournament curtainraiser, before further Group A matches with Senegal and 2010 finalists Netherlands.

“It’s a very important day for us, it’s a historic moment, it’s a very happy day for us, for the players and the staff,” Sanchez told a pre-match press conference on Saturday.

“It’s an extraordinary day... We have made a huge investment in this country.

“I hope we can enjoy football, our sport, and do our talking on the pitch. I hope all the countries in the world can come together to enjoy this.”

Qatar’s players have long been preparing together for the hosts’ World Cup opener and their coach added that he hoped the “massive sacrifices” they had made to be tournament-ready would pay off.

Qatar paused its Stars League in September to allow the international players to train together and play several friendlies to prepare for the World Cup.

That involved the players, who all feature in Qatar’s domestic league, spending several weeks away from their families and Sanchez praised their commitment to improve as a squad together ahead of Sunday’s Group A game against Ecuador.

“Obviously everything we’ve done in the past three years is to have a very competitive team in the World Cup. Every country’s situation is different and we’re a small country,” Sanchez told reporters.

“All our players play in the local league, so we decided one of the ways to strengthen the national team was to... make massive

sacrifices and spend long periods abroad.

“This shows the commitment of our players. All the time spent abroad training and competing is for tomorrow, Nov. 20, so we can start the competition well.”

Qatar skipper Hassan Al-Haydos, who has nearly 170 caps for the national team, said he was proud to lead the team that surprised the world when they won the Asian Cup in 2019.

“It’s a childhood dream,” he said. “We tried to qualify and we didn’t succeed in the past. But if we had played in the qualifiers, I believe we would have qualified.”

Even Ecuador coach Gustavo Alfaro echoed the same sentiment, saying the middle eastern country is not in the World Cup just because they are the hosts.

“Qatar have been preparing for this match for over 12 years – for five or six months they’ve been playing friendlies which means they’re a very well-organised team tactically. Obviously they have no players in the major European leagues but in my career I’ve always thought a very well-organised and physically prepared team are ready to make things difficult for any opponent. It’s no small thing they’ve been Asian champions. They’re not just here because they’re the host country,” Alfaro said.

Ecuador’s 20-year-old midfielder Moises Caicedo, meanwhile, remained confident to

show the world their mettle.

“We don’t feel pressure. We are a very young team. We are here because we worked very hard,” said Caicedo.

“We know tomorrow will be very important for both teams but we will focus on ourselves, we’ll be concentrated. There’ll be a few nerves as for many of us it’s the first World Cup but we’ll be calm and we’re waiting to bring our A game. All the eyes of the world will be on us and we can show on the pitch who we are,” he added.

Referees made to sweat in deception camp

AGENCIES, Doha

On yet another blisteringly hot morning in downtown Doha, the Qatar Sports Club Stadium turned into the venue for one of the most unique exercises ahead of the 2022 World Cup.

While there were no star players featuring in a match between two local teams, it was instead the best referees and assistants in the world that were being given a work out.

England’s Michael Oliver, Spain’s Antonio Miguel Mateu Lahoz and Danny Makkelie from the Netherlands all headlined the event, where the objective of the two teams strayed far from football.

Instead of scoring goals, players were tasked with one simple job: foul, dive, pull shirts and do whatever is in your power to deceive the referees. The spotlight is then on the officials to make the right decision and hand out the correct punishment.

Overall, eight penalties and more than 50 free-kicks were awarded while 15 cards were handed out.

“This is the last part of our preparation and it’s more about repeating what we’ve already done. Uniformity is important,” said Makkelie. “But the temperature is very high, the humidity also, so it’s about getting used to everything including the facilities,” he added.

“Of course there is a pressure. There isn’t a bigger stage, but you have to treat it the same. It’s 11 versus 11, a crowd and a stadium. I try to forget how many people are watching, I try to forget how important these games are because if you think about that too much you build up the pressure.”



Messi sits out practice

AGENCIES, Doha

Superstar Argentinian forward Lionel Messi and six other players were noticeably absent from Argentina’s training session at the Qatar University premises yesterday.

On Friday, two days after Argentinian footballers Joaquin Correa and Nicolas Gonzalez were sent home due to injuries, head coach Lionel Scaloni appears to be not taking any chances with additional losses and is coconing star players as a precautionary measure day ahead of the World Cup opening.

Team captain Messi and four other Argentinian national team starters, including midfielders Rodrigo De Paul and Leandro Paredes, defender Nicolas Otamendi and forward Angel di Maria trained separately from the rest of the team and stayed in the gym on Friday, according to the Argentine Football Association (AFA).

Two other Argentinian defenders, Lisandro Martinez and Juan Foyth, also skipped Friday’s training camp. The team did not stipulate the exact reasons behind the move, but such injury-prevention techniques are common practice.

La Albiceleste are riding high heading into the 2022 World Cup on the heels of a 35-match win streak. They are slated to play Saudi Arabia on November 22 before facing Mexico on November 26 and Poland on November 30.

World Cup opener tidbits

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When the curtain comes up on the FIFA World Cup in Qatar on Sunday, the hosts and Ecuador will take their turn to try to conjure a contest that is bracketed among the great World Cup occasions. Among all the group stage fixtures, it is often the first of the lot that is remembered besides finals and high-drama knockout ties.

Qatar will be the 11th hosts to feature in the tournament opener. Here’s look back at the opening fixtures of the previous 21 editions:

1930: France 4 Mexico 1, Estadio Pocitos, Montevideo, Uruguay

The World Cup was a newcomer on the sporting scene 92 years ago and saw 4,444 spectators – the lowest-ever till date.

1934: Italy 7 USA 1, Stadio Nazionale PNF, Rome, Italy

This 1934 World Cup was played as a straight knockout among the 16 entrants. The first World Cup where hosts featured in the tournament opener. Since the 1934 edition, no other team have scored more than what Italy netted against USA, and none had a better goal-difference in the tournament opener.

1938: Switzerland 1 Germany 1, Parc des Princes, Paris, France

With the 1938 edition being another sudden-death competition, the tournament opener was the first to go beyond 90 minutes of



regulation time but the two teams could not be separated after 120 minutes of play.

1950: Brazil 4 Mexico 0, Maracana Stadium, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

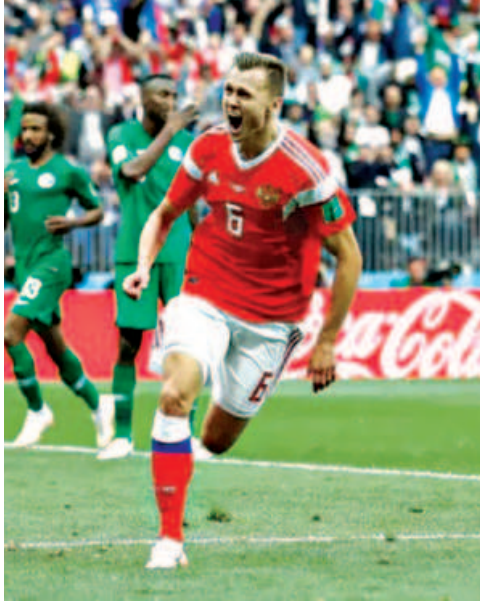
The attendance at the legendary Maracana stadium was close to 82 thousand, more than the three World Cup openers that preceded it. This was the first World Cup since World War 2 ended, and the first and only one that happened after more than a four-year gap.

1958: Sweden 3 Mexico 0, Rasunda Stadium, Solna, Sweden

A third World Cup opening match for Mexico and a third comprehensive loss.

1966: England 0-0 Uruguay, Wembley Stadium, London, England

First opener where the hosts failed to score and the score-line ended in 0-0. The next three openers will go on to feature the same score-line.



1970: Mexico 0-0 Soviet Union, Estadio Azteca, Mexico City, Mexico

The highest attendance (107,160) till date in the opening fixture.

1974: Brazil 0-0 Yugoslavia, Waldstadion, Frankfurt, West Germany

The first time a defending champions played the opening fixture.

1982: Belgium 1 Argentina 0, Camp Nou, Barcelona, Spain

Erwin Vandenberg ended a 20-year goal-drought for World Cup openers.

1986: Italy 1 Bulgaria 1, Estadio Azteca, Mexico City, Mexico

Mexico’s Estadio Azteca became the first venue to host two World Cup opening fixtures.

1990: Cameroon 1 Argentina 0, San Siro, Milan, Italy

Perhaps the most famous opening game of them all. Despite red cards for Andre Kanabiyik and Benjamin Massing either side of the goal, the Africans secured one of the great World Cup victories.

2002: Senegal 1 France 0, Seoul World Cup Stadium, Seoul, South Korea

In the first World Cup played in Asia, the opening fixture had all the ingredients for a repeat of Cameroon’s heroics 12 years earlier: imperious defending champions, fancied to retain their trophy, against underdogs from Africa.

2010: South Africa 1 Mexico 1, Soccer City, Johannesburg South Africa

Siphive Tshabalala never played club football outside South Africa but it was fitting that he became the first player to score in the first Africa-staged World Cup.

2018: Russia 5 Saudi Arabia 0, Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow, Russia

Fears over the hosts’ ability to shine at their own World Cup were alleviated with this crushing win.