

## Benzema tempted by Saudi Arabia's football project

REUTERS

Karim Benzema was lured by Saudi Arabia's "huge project" and the fact it is a Muslim country when he decided to end a trophy-laden stint with Real Madrid to move to Al-Ittihad, the French striker said on Wednesday.

Benzema became one of many big names to move to the Saudi Pro League when he joined Al-Ittihad as a free agent in June, signing a deal reportedly worth more than 100 million euros (\$106 million) after ending his glittering 14-year stay at Real.

He was joined by compatriot and World Cup winner N'Golo Kante, Brazilian midfielder Fabinho and Portuguese winger Jota as Al-Ittihad splashed out in a bid to retain their league title amid fierce competition from big-spending challengers.

"When the football project started here, it seemed like a huge project in all respects, and I wanted to be a part of it and help advance the game in Saudi Arabia, and this is one of the reasons that made me come here," Benzema said in an interview with the Saudi Pro League, posted on messaging platform X.

"Also, Saudi Arabia is a Muslim country and they welcomed me with open hands, and I felt loved immediately. As a Muslim when you are in Mecca you feel at peace... it is an exceptional place."

Benzema has scored three goals in seven league matches this season and provided two assists.

"There is a lot of passion and football history here and I am happy with the level of the game. I am really surprised by the level in Saudi Arabia because in Europe we don't watch a lot of football matches here," the 35-year-old added.

"But now there are lots of people (in Europe) who are watching the Saudi league after many big names were brought in."

Al-Ittihad lie fourth in the league table with 19 points, four adrift of leaders Al-Hilal.



Saad Uddin came off the bench in the 89th minute of the match and scored the equalising goal three minutes later as Bangladesh salvaged a 1-1 draw against Maldives in the first leg of the World Cup Prequalifying fixture at the National Stadium in Male yesterday. (Bottom) Bangladesh found a lot of support from the expatriates working in the island nation. PHOTO: STAR

## Supersub Saad saves Bangladesh's blushes

SPORTS REPORTER

Substitute Saad Uddin scored with his first touch to help Bangladesh salvage a 1-1 draw against Maldives in their away match of the preliminary round of the World Cup Qualifiers at Male National Stadium yesterday.

Saad, who came off the bench to replace Bishwanath Ghosh in the 89th minute, placed home from close range in the second minute of stoppage time following a low cross from Rakib Hossain to earn a point for the men in red and green. The full-back was soon booked for taking off his shirt as the whole of the team, including the players and officials at the dugout, celebrated the equaliser wildly.

Bangladesh will host Maldives at the Bashundhara Kings Arena on October 17 in the reverse fixture, with the aggregate winners slated to qualify for the group stage of the qualifiers. A draw in that game will take it to tiebreakers to decide the winners.

"It feels really good because Maldives are a very strong team at their own backyard. Whenever we came here, they played well with a good attacking line-up. Today they got many chances and we also created many chances. It was a 50-50 game with both sides displaying good football. At least, we drew the match, which is why we feel good as all of our players, including the three new players, played well,"



forward Rakib Hossain said at the post-match press conference.

Both sides squandered a lot of scoring chances before Maldives capitalised on a miscued clearance from defender Tariq Kazi in the 78th minute to take the lead. However, Javier Cabrera's charges hit back in stoppage time to deny Maldives, who beat Bangladesh three times in the last seven years on their home soil.

For the first 20 minutes or so, both sides played cautiously, with Maldives looking too quick on the break or in transition. Bangladesh were lucky not to concede the lead in the 18th minute when Ali Fahir rattled the near post from a counter attack.

Afterwards Bangladesh, despite erratic passing and frequent loss of possession, created a couple of

good chances but neither Rakib nor Faisal Ahmed Fahim found the target.

Rakib narrowly missed the far post from a counter attack after the break and then set up Fahim inside the box but the young winger struck the side netting from close range.

Fahim was off-target once again while substitute Rabiul Islam was denied by the Maldives goalkeeper before debutant left-back Shakil Ahmed rescued Bangladesh by clearing an open chance. Debutant goalkeeper Mitul Marma then denied Fahir from a one-on-one situation.

As the match seemed headed for a goalless draw, Bangladesh conceded the lead with substitute Hassan Nazeem tapping in from close range after Tariq's clearance came his way off the body of Shakil. Fahir then wasted another glorious chance in the 89th minute with only Bangladesh goalkeeper to beat.

Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera was happy with the performance despite missing some of his key players due to disciplinary reasons.

"We have to win the home match and it is going to be the same. If we lost here or drew here, we had to win the home match. Even if we won the match today, we would have definitely gone to the home match for the win," said Cabrera.

## Ronaldinho due on Oct 18

SPORTS REPORTER

Brazil's World Cup-winning footballer Ronaldinho Gaucho will visit Bangladesh on a short trip on October 18, confirmed sports promoter Satadru Dutta.

Talking to The Daily Star, the Kolkata-based sports promoter said that the Brazilian will have a meet and greet event at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Dhaka on the night of October 18, where Bangladesh Football Federation president Kazi Salahuddin and national team captain Jamal Bhuiyan, among others, have been invited.

The now-retired footballer had won all major trophies with Brazil and dazzled football fans around the world while playing for European giants like PSG, Barcelona, and AC Milan.

Ronaldinho, according to Dutta, will arrive in Dhaka following a two-day trip to Kolkata at 2:00pm and will leave Dhaka in the early hours of October 19.

The Brazilian may also pay a visit to the Prime Minister's Office subject to an appointment of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

## Rony hits ton on NCL's opening day

SPORTS REPORTER

Dhaka division opener Rony Talukdar struck the first century of the 25th edition of the National Cricket League (NCL), hitting a 112-ball 102 against Rangpur on the opening day of their Tier 1 encounter at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka yesterday.

Rony nearly carried his bat through the innings before departing as the final batter, as Rangpur bundled out Dhaka for just 166.

Pacer Nobin Islam was the pick of the Rangpur bowlers, finishing with five for 28.

Rony started his morning with a punch through the covers for four and kept dealing in boundaries, hitting 19 fours while wickets kept falling at regular succession at the other end.

Only two other Dhaka batters got into double figures as they got bundled out for a paltry total.



In reply, the defending champions Rangpur ended the day at 133 for three with Mim Mosaddek unbeaten on 55.

At the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram, Pinak Ghosh and Mominul put on a second wicket partnership of 191 for Chattogram against Barishal in their Tier 2 match, however, both batters missed out on tons.

Sohag Gazi turned things around for Barishal as he first got Mominul caught at short-leg for 94 and then attled Pinak's stumps for 96.

Gazi finished with five for 54 as Chattogram slumped from 198 for 1 to 238 all-out. Barishal closed out the day at 28 for 2.

In the Tier 1 game at Sylhet Academy Ground, Dhaka Metro reached 242 for 9 after fifties from Shadman Islam and Naeem Islam with the latter unbeaten on 65 at close.

Afif Hossain struck a 50-ball 63 while Mohammad Mithun's 56 and Anamul Haque's 47 as Khulna division off bowled out for 288 against Rajshahi at Shaheed Kamruzzaman Stadium in Rajshahi.

Rajshahi pacer Al-Amin Hossain picked up two wickets in four overs as Rajshahi reached 15 for 2 at stumps.

## Pak women to arrive on Oct 20

SPORTS REPORTER

Pakistan women's team are set to arrive in Dhaka on October 20 for three Women's T20Is and three Women's ODIs, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) said in a media release yesterday.

The ODI series will be part of the ICC Women's Championship.

The Pakistan team will arrive on the 20th and travel to Chattogram on the same day. The visitors would then hold their first practice session on October 23.

The T20Is will be played at Chattogram's Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium on October 25, 27 and 29 respectively. All the matches will begin at 4:30pm.

The three ODIs are slated to be played on November 4, 7 and 10 respectively at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium.

## European Qualifiers are back

AFP, Paris

The road to Germany resumed this week as Euro 2024 qualifying kicked back into action with a number of teams in position to clinch qualification. Here are some of the highlights with two rounds of matches spread over six days from October 12 to 17.

**Perfect Portugal, France closing in**  
Roberto Martinez has enjoyed a serene start as Portugal coach, watching his side plunder 24 goals without reply in a weak Group J. A seventh straight win, against Slovakia on Friday, will see them over the finish line with three games to spare.

France are in a similar position with five successive wins in Group B. They can punch their ticket to Germany by defeating the Netherlands again, or by drawing if Greece lose in Dublin.

Belgium visit Austria in a meeting of the top two in Group F. The teams split the points in Brussels in June, and a win for either side on Friday in Vienna would send the victor through to the finals.

**Crowded at the top in Group H**  
One point separates four teams at the top of Group H, with outsiders Kazakhstan trying to crash the party and appear at a first major tournament.



Kazakhstan, assured of at least a play-off spot, are level on 12 points with Finland -- one behind Denmark and Slovenia, who head the section by virtue of goals scored.

The next two matchdays could go a long way to deciding the top two. Denmark host Kazakhstan on Saturday, while Slovenia are at home to Finland.

Kazakhstan then go to Finland three days later, Slovenia are away to Northern Ireland, and Denmark will be almost certain to beat San Marino -- losers in all

but one of 82 previous Euro qualifiers.

**Israel bid on hold amid conflict**

The outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas prompted UEFA to postpone Thursday's match against Group I leaders Switzerland in Tel Aviv.

Officials are still assessing whether Israel's game away to Kosovo can go ahead Sunday as scheduled.

Israel is reeling under the brutal assault launched by Hamas militants on Saturday in which at least 1,200

people have now been confirmed dead in the worst attack in the country's 75-year history.

In Gaza, 1,055 people have been killed as Israel has pounded the densely populated territory with retaliatory air strikes and shelling.

**England host Italy in Wembley final repeat**

Gareth Southgate's England hold a six-point cushion in Group C, with reigning champions Italy possessing a game in hand on all other sides.

England gained a measure of revenge for their loss on penalties to Italy in the Euro 2020 final, launching their qualifying campaign with a 2-1 win in Naples in March.

Ukraine and North Macedonia are level on points with Italy. Those two nations face off Saturday as Italy host Malta.

Luciano Spalletti began his tenure as Italy coach with a draw last month in North Macedonia, but victory over Ukraine eased fears of another doomed qualifying campaign after failing to reach the last two World Cups.

Another win for England next Tuesday would all but seal first place ahead of the final rounds of the qualifiers in November.