

Algeria on Saturday extended coach Vladimir Petkovic's contract until 2028, just before the World Cup. Since taking over in 2024, Petkovic has led the Desert Foxes to 21 wins, 4 draws, and 3 losses. Algeria will face Argentina, Austria, and Jordan in Group J. The 62-year-old Swiss previously coached Switzerland (2014-21) and won the Italian Cup with Roma in 2013.



ARGENTINA, BRAZIL RAMP UP WC PREP



Brazil and Argentina ramped up their World Cup preparations with victories on Saturday as football's heavyweights geared up for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, starting on June 11. Three-time champions Argentina rested Lionel Messi against Honduras in Texas but still secured a comfortable 2-0 win. Lautaro Martinez starred with a goal and an assist, while Giuliano Simeone added the second. Five-time world champions Brazil edged Egypt 2-1 in Cleveland. Bruno Guimaraes opened the scoring before Mostafa Ziko pulled Egypt back on level terms -- both teams scoring inside the first 11 minutes of the game, capitalising on defensive errors. Egypt introduced Mohamed Salah in the second half, but Endrick's strike, assisted by Raphinha, ensured Brazil walked away with a victory in their last friendly before the mega event. Elsewhere, Harry Kane's first-half header earned England a 1-0 win over New Zealand in Tampa. Manager Thomas Tuchel rotated his entire side at halftime, giving 22 players minutes in sweltering 32-degree Celsius heat. Germany extended their winning streak to nine matches with a 2-1 victory over World Cup co-hosts the United States in Chicago. Kai Havertz headed in Joshua Kimmich's free kick after two minutes before Antonee Robinson levelled with a stunning volley. Leroy Sane restored Germany's lead in the 57th minute. Portugal also prevailed 2-1 against Chile in a fiery contest in Oeiras, featuring Cristiano Ronaldo. Goncalo Guedes and Bruno Fernandes scored for the hosts before Lucas Cepeda grabbed a late consolation. Rafael Leao and Ivan Roman were both sent off as the match ended with 10 men on each side.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS, FACEBOOK



Level playing field and the science behind it

STAR SPORTS DESK

With just three days remaining for the start of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the world's attention is firmly fixed on the superstars ready to grace the pitch in the USA, Mexico, and Canada. Yet, beneath the boots of Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe, and Erling Haaland lies what is arguably the greatest engineering feat in sporting history -- the grass itself.

For the first time, football's ultimate tournament has been expanded to 48 teams, with 104 matches scheduled across 16 venues spanning an entire continent. From the extreme high altitudes of Mexico City to the unforgiving heat of Texas, the geographic diversity is staggering. To combat this, FIFA took a revolutionary step, mandating that every single stadium feature an absolutely uniform, high-performing natural playing surface.

THE EIGHT-YEAR CRUSADE

Achieving this required an unprecedented multi-million dollar scientific crusade. Eight years ago, FIFA commissioned a specialised research grant, partnering with the world's elite turfgrass programs at the University of Tennessee (UT) and Michigan State University (MSU). Led by renowned experts Dr. John Sorochan and Professor John "Trey" Rogers III, scientists have spent nearly a decade in climate-controlled test fields, obsessively engineering the perfect blades of grass, capable of withstanding high traffic while providing consistent ball roll and traction.

SCIENCE MEETS SPORT

FIFA's engineers went beyond selecting seed varieties. Specialised testing, including the FLEX system, measures interactions between cleats and turf, tracking factors like rotational resistance and penetration. This ensures that players experience a similar surface whether they sprint in Miami or Guadalajara, or that a ball rolls exactly the same way in Vancouver as it does in Mexico City. Each pitch has been fine-tuned using years of data to create near-identical playing conditions across venues.

CONVERTING NFL STRONGHOLDS TO FOOTBALL ARENAS

The core challenge lay in the stadiums

themselves. Out of the 16 venues, five are entirely domed, severely restricting natural sunlight, while eight are traditional NFL strongholds that strictly utilise synthetic turf. To meet FIFA's rigid criteria, stadiums like New York's MetLife Stadium -- host of the final -- had to undergo a total metamorphosis. Over 82,000 square feet of artificial turf was ripped out and replaced with a temporary natural marvel grown for months under pristine conditions in North Carolina before being shipped hundreds of miles north.

THE UNDERGROUND BLUEPRINT: SAND, VACUUM, AND CUSTOM SEEDS

The engineering behind these fields resembles an intricate puzzle. The pitches are built on an 18-inch deep foundation of specialised sand and gravel, integrated with advanced subsurface vacuum ventilation and automated irrigation systems. Rather than standard turf, researchers settled on specific, tailored grass blends: primarily a highly resilient mixture of Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass for cooler climates, and specialised Bermudagrass for shaded and warmer Mexican venues like Monterrey's Estadio BBVA.

WEAVING THE FUTURE: HYBRID STITCHING AND AI TESTING

But the real magic happens at the surface layer. To withstand the bruising traffic of 104 matches over six weeks, FIFA is deploying state-of-the-art hybrid technology. Once the natural sod is laid in interlocking rectangular chunks, massive sewing machine-like robots traverse the pitch, stitching millions of synthetic polyethylene fibers deep into the root zone. These artificial fibers account for roughly 3% of the pitch, acting as an anchor that prevents the natural grass from tearing or divoting under rapid turns.

READY FOR KICKOFF

As the final countdown begins, the logistical masterstroke is complete. Over 88 total miles of natural sod have been transported, laid, and stitched across North America. FIFA's eight-year effort has turned the playing field into a feat of engineering, blending nature with technology to create arguably the most advanced World Cup pitches ever seen.

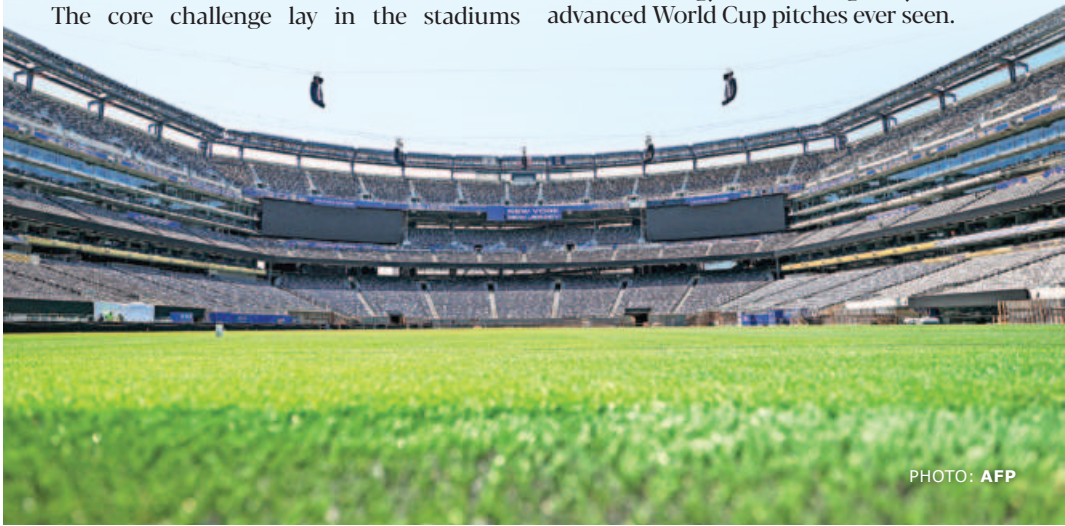


PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

VISA DISPUTE SHADOWS IRAN'S WC ARRIVAL

Iran's World Cup squad arrived in the Mexican border city of Tijuana on Sunday, days before the tournament kicks off, with a dispute over US visas continuing to cast a shadow over their campaign. While players received the documents needed to enter the United States -- which is in open military conflict with Tehran -- for their Group G matches, Iranian officials said several members of the team's support staff were denied visas. The issue has prompted complaints from Iran's football federation and embassy, which accused Washington of discriminatory treatment. Based in Mexico throughout the tournament, Iran will travel to the United States for matches against New Zealand, Belgium and Egypt amid heightened diplomatic tensions between the two countries.

Cabinet approves BTV's World Cup deal

UNB

The Cabinet Committee on Government Procurement on Saturday recommended approval of Bangladesh Television's (BTV) proposal to acquire the all-media broadcasting rights for the FIFA World Cup 2026 directly from FIFA at a cost of Tk 72.71 crore.

The proposal, submitted by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, was discussed at the committee's 25th meeting of 2026, chaired by Finance Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury. FIFA was selected under the Direct Procurement Method as the sole rights holder.

The acquisition will allow state-run BTV to broadcast World Cup matches and related content nationwide.

'We're going to break it': Mexico eyes world record

AFP, Mexico City

Just days before Mexico hosts the opening match of the 2026 World Cup, thousands of football fans gathered in Mexico City on Saturday to attempt a world record for the largest-ever human wave.

The event took place along the iconic Paseo de la Reforma, where participants dressed in Mexico jerseys, waved flags and danced to music in a festive display of national pride ahead of the tournament.

The wave, now a staple of sporting events worldwide, was popularised in Mexican stadiums during the 1986 World Cup. Organisers hoped to celebrate that legacy by creating a wave stretching roughly two kilometres through the heart of the capital.

"I say we're going to break it. There are already so many of us, and we can do it!" said 31-year-old content creator Sally Aviles. "We'll make it happen because we've always done it -- at every game, in every stadium."

Adding colour to the event were women dressed as "catrinas" -- skeleton figures associated with Mexico's Day of the Dead celebrations -- while members of the La Sonora Santanera orchestra provided a lively soundtrack.

Following instructions from a master of ceremonies, participants raised their arms,



PHOTO: AFP

dropped to their knees and sprang back up in sequence, creating the familiar ripple effect that swept through the crowd.

For many, the event was about more than setting a record.

"I couldn't miss out on being part of this wonderful event, on showing the world what Mexico is really like -- the atmosphere, the love, the unity, the peace," said 55-year-old Gloria Fragoso.

She added that Mexico was "more than ready" to welcome fans for the World Cup, which the country is co-hosting with the United States and Canada.

Later on Saturday, cultural authorities announced on social media that the record had been broken, though no details were provided. Guinness World Records is expected to verify the attempt officially.