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PHOTO: FACEBOOK

US battle Paraguay in pressure-packed opener

The United States will be under pressure to kick off their World Cup campaign with a victory when they host Paraguay on Friday, with anything less likely to raise fresh questions about the tournament co-hosts' credentials. History favours the Americans, who have won their last three meetings with the South Americans, including a 2-1 friendly victory in November, but they will have to get into gear quickly in a tough group that also includes Australia and Turkey. The teams also met at the inaugural World Cup in 1930, when the US emerged victorious. A packed Los Angeles Stadium in Inglewood is expected to provide a raucous atmosphere as the hosts look to settle quickly through an attack led by Weston McKennie, Christian Pulisic and Folarin Balogun. Defence remains the main concern as they've managed just one clean sheet in their last 13 matches while conceding 11 goals in their previous four outings. Paraguay are appearing at their first World Cup since reaching the quarterfinals in 2010, where they lost to eventual champions Spain. Paraguay's strength lies at the back, but goals have been harder to come by, with just 14 scored in 18 qualifying matches. Their task is made tougher by the absence of leading forward Julio Enciso, who misses the opener with a thigh injury.

Canada's World Cup dreams face Bosnia test

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Canada stand on the brink of a defining moment in their football history as they kick off their World Cup campaign in a high-stakes Group B clash against Bosnia and Herzegovina in Toronto on Friday. With both nations seeking a first-ever place in the knockout rounds, the pressure is firmly on the hosts, who are still searching for their maiden World Cup victory after six defeats from six matches across the 1986 and 2022 editions. However, Jesse Marsch has transformed the mood around the team since taking charge in 2024, guiding Canada to a surprise Copa America semifinal and an unbeaten run in 2026.

- Canada are still chasing their first men's World Cup win, having lost all six previous matches and conceded 12 goals while scoring only twice. Only El Salvador have also lost their first six men's World Cup matches.
- Canada are unbeaten in 2026, going eight matches without defeat and keeping six clean sheets during that run.
- The hosts boast a formidable record at Toronto Stadium, losing just one of their last 28 matches



PHOTO: REUTERS

- there (W18 D9).
- Canada's preparations have been hit by the absence of captain Alphonso Davies, sidelined with a hamstring injury.
- Davies scored Canada's first-ever World Cup goal during the 2022 tournament.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina scored in all 10 of their qualifying matches and suffered only one defeat, a 2-1 loss to Austria.
- Veteran striker Edin Dzeko, now

40, the country's all-time leading scorer, netted six goals in nine qualifiers. Dzeko and defender Sead Kolasinac are the only members of the current squad with previous World Cup experience, having featured in 2014. ● Canada's attacking hopes rest largely on their all-time highest goalscorer Jonathan David, who has been directly involved in five goals (4 goals, 1 assist) across the 2024 Copa America and 2025 Gold Cup.

Iran finds supporters in Mexico

AFP, Tijuana

Iran's national football team walked out of their hotel in Tijuana to cheers on Wednesday, with Mexican supporters hoping to lift the spirits of a side whose World Cup campaign has been partly overshadowed by war. "Vamos Iran! Vamos Iran!" chanted around 30 fans, who asked Iranian footballers for autographs as though they were supporting their own national team. Jose Leyva, a 28-year-old pizzeria worker, waited several hours by the fence to get a signature from Mehdi Taremi, Iran's star striker. "I feel bad for them," Leyva told AFP. "In my view, politics shouldn't be mixed with sports." This year's World Cup -- co-hosted by Mexico, the United States and Canada -- has felt the impact of the Middle East war, which began in February with US-Israeli strikes on Iran. The Iran side, known as Team Melli, is navigating uncharted waters as the conflict heated up again in recent days.



Portugal skipper Cristiano Ronaldo gazes towards the heavens, as if searching for answers to his struggles ahead of leading his side to North America for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Portugal edged Nigeria 2-1 in their final warm-up match on Wednesday before the global showpiece, but it was far from an ideal night for Ronaldo. Age appears to have caught up with the 41-year-old forward, who failed to convert at least three straightforward chances, raising concerns over whether the iconic striker could end up hindering one of the most talented squads in the world. In just about a week, Portugal will begin their World Cup campaign against DR Congo, with both Portuguese fans and Ronaldo supporters hoping he can come alive when the tournament gets underway and rediscover the big-game magic that has defined his career.

PHOTO: AFP

Raphinha eager to repay Ancelotti's faith

AFP

Brazil star Raphinha intends to repay the faith shown in him by new coach Carlo Ancelotti at the World Cup after frequently proving to be the nemesis of the Italian during past encounters at club level. The pair came up against each other over three years in Spain when the 29-year-old forward was at Barcelona and Ancelotti was on the Real Madrid bench. Ancelotti left Madrid at the end of last season, after a campaign in which Raphinha scored as he captained Barca to a 4-0 win at the Bernabeu in La Liga and netted twice as the Catalans won 4-3 in the reverse fixture, en route to taking the title. He also featured in the Barcelona teams that beat Ancelotti's Real in the finals of the Copa del Rey and Spanish Super Cup. "What he has achieved in football is admirable, not just to those who worked with him but also his opponents," Raphinha told reporters Wednesday at the Brazil team's World Cup base in New Jersey. "It was always very difficult coming up against him, but I was lucky to come out smiling a lot of the time. "Now I hope to do for him all the things

I did against him. To help get good results for him and for the team, because they really deserve it." Ancelotti is leading Brazil as they attempt to end a 24-year wait to win a record-extending sixth World Cup at the tournament in North America. The former AC Milan and Chelsea

coach celebrated his 67th birthday on Wednesday, three days before the Selecao begin their World Cup campaign against Morocco in Group C at the MetLife Stadium, just outside New York City. Brazil are set to go into that game without Neymar, who was called up for the tournament despite not being capped



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since 2023 because of injuries and is now set to miss Saturday's match due to a calf problem. Raphinha may need to step up in Neymar's absence, four years after his first World Cup in which he appeared in every game but failed to score as the Selecao went out to Croatia on penalties in the quarter-finals in Qatar. "I think I felt more pressure in 2022, because I was more immature. I was quite new to the national team and had just arrived at Barcelona," said the former Leeds United winger. I didn't feel completely settled in the Brazil squad. I feel much more ready now." He is coming off a season in which he scored 21 goals and set up eight more in all competitions as Barcelona won La Liga. But he missed five of Brazil's six friendly games between October and March due to injuries.

"Luis Diaz as Ballon d'Or, why not? For me he's top five in the world right now already. If we get to the final, he can win the Ballon d'Or."

Colombia captain James Rodriguez



Haiti forced to change World Cup kit over war imagery

Haiti have been forced to change their kit design just days before their World Cup opener against Scotland after FIFA banned a depiction of a war scene on the shirts. An illustration of the Battle of Vertieres in 1803, which secured Haiti's independence, with the Haitian flag had been embedded on the shirts worn by the players in two warm-up friendlies in Florida. Colombian manufacturer Saeta said on Wednesday that they have modified the kit to meet FIFA's regulations.

New york renames streets after Thierry Henry, Pele

New York has honored two footballing greats by temporarily renaming streets after Thierry Henry and Pele ahead of the World Cup kickoff, according to the City Council. The final of the tournament will be played next month at the MetLife Stadium, rebranded as the New York New Jersey Stadium, just outside the city. Crowds gathered at West 50th Street and 6th Avenue in downtown Manhattan to mark the unveiling of "Thierry Henry Way" by officials, according to videos posted to social media on Wednesday. The city has also renamed the intersection of Shea Road and Meridian Road, in the Queens borough, after Brazilian legend Pele, according to the New York City Council website. The street names will stay in place until November 1.

Denied World Cup entry, Somali referee Artan to officiate UEFA Super Cup

Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan, who is unable to take part in the World Cup after being denied entry to the United States, has been appointed to officiate next month's UEFA Super Cup between Paris St Germain and Aston Villa. Artan, 34, was named among match officials for the June 11-July 19 World Cup but was forced to miss the tournament after U.S. authorities refused him entry despite having a valid visa. European soccer's governing body said on Thursday that his appointment for the Super Cup followed discussions with the Confederation of African Football (CAF) and formed part of a recently signed cooperation agreement between the two bodies.

'Chill, Relax': Infantino defends FIFA over visa issues

"Chill, relax" was Gianni Infantino's message as the FIFA president sought to defuse concerns over visa issues that have clouded the buildup to the World Cup, saying football's governing body could not dictate immigration decisions to host nations. Speaking on the eve of the tournament opener between co-hosts Mexico and South Africa, Infantino addressed concerns surrounding Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan, who was barred from entering the US despite having a valid visa.

Ivory Coast supporters banned from World Cup

Ivory Coast home-based fans have been denied visas to the United States, the president of the national supporters' committee told AFP on Thursday. The Ivory Coast supporters group, said Julien Kouadio Adonis, president of the National Committee of Elephants Supporters (CNSE), which operates under the country's Ministry of Sport, organises trips for the country's small number of travelling fans to follow the team abroad.