

Sports

One year from World Cup, clock ticks louder for Qatar

Six of eight stadiums due to host Arab Cup Nov 30

DOHA: After upending the football establishment by winning the right to host the World Cup, Qatar's preparations are heading into overdrive with a year to go as they rush to welcome more than a million fans and prove their critics wrong.

The tiny Gulf state has a reputation for punching above its weight but challenges do not come much bigger than holding football's showpiece event in a desert peninsula of 2.7 million without a strong sporting tradition.

Twelve months before the November 21, 2022 kick-off, the Qatari capital Doha, which is hosting almost the entire tournament, is dotted with roadworks and building sites that are causing chaos for its inhabitants. With some Qatari infrastructure projects delayed by the pandemic, the clock is ticking more loudly than organizers might have liked, just as scrutiny of the preparations starts to rise.

However, most of the building blocks are in place, with six of the eight World Cup stadiums due to host the 16-team Arab Cup from November 30. "I've never seen a country in the world which has been so ready so much in advance... it will be like a toy store for fans when they come," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in Qatar this week.

Qatar rocked football in 2010 when they beat favorites the United States in the World Cup bid process, a victory that sparked accusations of vote-buying — which were hotly denied — and questions over the country's suitability.

Since then, FIFA's old guard has been

toppled in a welter of corruption cases and Qatar has emerged as a major player in the sport, snapping up French giants Paris Saint-Germain and with the Qatar Foundation becoming Barcelona's first shirt sponsor.

'A lot of criticism'

Meanwhile, Qatar has faced constant criticism of the working conditions of its hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers, including those who built the World Cup stadiums. It has responded with labor reforms, although officials admit the situation is a "work in progress".

"Since we won the World Cup (rights) we have received a lot of criticism. There is constructive criticism that we tried to take on board," Fatma al-Nuaimi, head of communications at the Qatar organizing committee, said last month.

"We also try not to let this

criticism stop us." Qatar has also come under fire for its criminalization of homosexuality.

Resource-rich Qatar has been active in other sports apart from football, holding the world athletics championships in 2019 and its inaugural Formula One grand prix takes place today, exactly a year before the World Cup opens.

But the World Cup, with 1.2 million visitors pouring in — nearly half the country's population — is an undertaking of an altogether different scale. Serious questions are being asked about where the fans will stay, with reservations already closed at Doha's limited collec-



DOHA: In this file fisheye photo taken on October 22, 2021 shows fireworks illuminating the venue during the opening ceremony of the Al-Thumama Stadium in the capital Doha, ahead of the Amir Cup final football match between Al-Sadd and Al-Rayyan. — AFP



Providing stay for visitors main challenge

tion of hotels.

Officials have talked about providing floating hotels and promoting home-stays, while many fans will end up in newly built apartments and even air-conditioned tents. Even so, accommodating such numbers — about 300,000 a day, plus 150,000 World Cup workers, according to one source with knowledge of the matter — looks difficult.

'Uncharted waters'

"This World Cup is being implemented in uncharted waters: there has never been a mega-sporting event with so many visitors and working staff in addi-

tion to the regular population on such a small territory who will stay put for the duration," the source said. "There is simply no historic experience to draw from."

Most of the World Cup stadiums will be tested, albeit with limited numbers of fans, at the upcoming Arab Cup which finishes on December 18, a year to the day before the World Cup final. The Lusail Stadium, which will host the 2022 decider, will not feature at the Arab Cup as it is undergoing "testing and commissioning of... multiple systems", its project manager told AFP last month.

Meanwhile, Qatar has pledged to vaccinate fans who are not inoculated

against COVID-19, while FIFA has moved to allay concerns about the availability of alcohol in the Muslim country, where it is largely banned. "(Alcohol) will be available in designated areas during the upcoming FIFA World Cup," a FIFA spokesperson told AFP. On the pitch, holders France are strongly tipped, with England also expected to figure but European champions Italy must fight through a playoff next year just to qualify. Expectations are low for Qatar, who will make their World Cup debut after qualifying as hosts, despite their impressive Asian Cup victory in 2019. — AFP



LE MANS: In this file photo taken on January 20, 2012 PSG's French managing director Jean-Claude Blanc (second left) flanked by Paris Saint-Germain's Qatar President and CEO Nasser Al-Khelaifi (fourth left), Prime Minister Francois Fillon (second right) and Sports minister David Douillet (third right), applauds during the French cup football match Sable-sur-Sarthe against Paris Saint-Germain at the Le Mans stadium, western France. — AFP

Qatar and PSG, a lasting bond beyond World Cup

PARIS: Qatar's investment in French giants Paris Saint-Germain, and its use of the club as a central tool for the gas-rich emirate's soft power diplomacy over the past decade, is unlikely to change after next year's World Cup, experts predict.

What is Qatar going to do after the tournament? Will it pour money into the club on the same scale, having spent over a billion euros since the 2011 takeover by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), albeit without winning the Champions League, European football's holy grail?

This question is quietly mulled by the ranks of French football observers, and in particular PSG supporters, who have seen Kylian Mbappe, Neymar and Lionel Messi move to the French capital.

'Tool of seduction worldwide'

In football terms, the sums are huge. Yet it appears almost irrelevant to gas-rich Qatar. "I think the World Cup is just one part, it's already a triumph itself for Qatar to have obtained it. But that shouldn't in any way change their policy," believes Raphael Le Magoaric, a PhD researcher in geopolitics specialized in the Gulf countries.

Predicting the future and diplomatic strategy of a country is a perilous exercise, experts questioned by AFP warn. The risks are manifold, and several factors can intervene to change the perspective at any given moment. But the tidal wave ridden by the emirate for nearly 30 years seems well anchored to Qatar's strategy.

Coincided in the late 1980s, the term "soft power" was popularized by the American political scientist Joseph Nye, co-founder of the international relations theory of neoliberalism, who served in both the Carter and Clinton administrations. It refers to the power of influence, the persuasion of others through appeal and attraction, without coercive means.

"Shortly after the invasion of Kuwait, Qatar asked itself the question, 'Who can prevent them from such an attack?' It's not its army, nor its oil tankers, nor its technology. It's Western public opinion," said geopolitics expert Marc Lavergne, the director of research at the

French Nations Centre for Scientific Research and the University of Tours.

"Qatar has developed a whole set of pillars that can be linked to soft power, such as art and a global sports policy in which Paris Saint-Germain is a tool of seduction worldwide. It's the construction of a smooth image, exotic, idealized. Qatar is not going to stop developing this strategy tomorrow," he added.

'Best showcase for emirate'

It's a policy which has put Qatar on the world map from a geopolitical view. "Close to 15 years ago Qatar did not exist in public opinion," says Lavergne. "Paris Saint-Germain is central to this policy. With the club they reach the whole world."

The refusal to sell French World Cup-winning forward Mbappe last summer, despite an offer of 180 million euros from Real Madrid, was perceived by some as financial folly. "But the economists asked about it in France don't have Qatar's frame of reference," Le Magoaric said. "You have to compare these investments to those of a defense ministry."

The money has helped the club win seven French league championships in the past decade and PSG reached the final of the 2020 Champions League. Europe's showpiece for club sides. Other analysts said next year's World Cup matters little in view of the success so far of the emirate's strategy.

"Since the beginning and still today, PSG constitutes in my mind a major investment for the country. For some, it's the best showcase for the emirate," says Carole Gomez, senior research fellow in sport and geopolitics at IRIS, a French think tank on geopolitical and strategic issues.

"I don't believe investment will be withdrawn the day after the World Cup. For one, because the geopolitical and economic reasons that pushed Doha to invest in sport are still there. It's still a question of asserting its individuality in front of its neighbors, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but equally to diversify its economic investments in order to think about the post-gas era."

In addition, the ties between Qatar and France stretch well beyond the realms of this sporting connection. "Qatar is a strategic ally of France, and has been for years," underlined Lavergne. An alliance in which the football club is just one element, but a sensitive one. "Everything that affects Paris Saint-Germain is extremely sensitive, it's in the hands of the emir. It's eminently strategic," Le Magoaric added. —AFP

The Middle East's La Masia: Qatar academy fuels World Cup dream

DOHA: With many millions of dollars invested and thousands of hours spent on the training pitch, Qatar's great football experiment will face the ultimate test when its start-from-scratch team makes its World Cup debut next year.

Honed at Doha's renowned Aspire Academy by coaches imported from Spanish giants Barcelona, no expense has been spared by tiny, wealthy Qatar, who crave respectability on the pitch as the Middle East's first World Cup hosts.

Now, as night falls over the state-of-the-art facility just a year from the tournament's start, the players' laughs and jokes on the pitch are replaced by serious expressions. "I feel pressure and responsibility, it's a beautiful and difficult feeling at the same time," midfielder Abdallah Al-Ahrak told AFP. "We're nearly there, only a year to go. We're trying to prepare as well as we can."

Before the Aspire graduates blossomed, football was a desert for resource-rich Qatar, who embarrassingly lost all three group games at the 2015 Asian Cup in Australia. Just four years later, Qatar scythed through the competition to be crowned Asian champions for the first time, with Sudan-born Aspire alumnus Almoez Ali netting a bicycle-kick — his record ninth goal of the tournament — in the 3-1 final win over Japan.

The team coached by Felix Sanchez, who was lured from Barcelona's famed La Masia academy, alma mater of Lionel Messi, also won the 2014 Asian under-19s title during its nine years together. "It's more than two years since we won the Asian Cup. We can't be content with just living off our memories, but we shouldn't forget what we've accomplished, either," the Spaniard said.



DOHA: In this file photo taken on January 4, 2017 Bayern Munich players attend a training session at the Aspire Academy in Doha. —AFP

'Anything can happen'

Seventy percent of Qatar's team came through Aspire, according to its website, but football isn't the facility's only success story. High-jumper Mutaz Essa Barshim is a two-time world champion and famously agreed to share Olympic gold this year with Gianmarco Tamberi of Italy.

But next year, it will be all about the World Cup and hopes of similar scenes to 2019, when Qataris and the country's expatriates — who make up about 90 percent of the population — enjoyed a rare moment of joint celebration.

Those hopes rest on the shoulders of the Qatari team who, during AFP's recent visit to Aspire, were training on a small pitch as teenagers in sports gear ambled down corridors nearby. Goalkeeper Yousef Hassan said the players' excitement is rising as their World Cup "dream" creeps closer and closer to reality. "I've watched the World Cup on TV since I was small. I've always had that ambition, that desire that one day I'd play in it too," he said.

"Thank God we've been given this chance that we have today, and we're all determined to make the most of it," added the 25-year-old. "We're going to write our names in history, obviously it's something we're really looking forward to."

Qatar, who are the first hosts never to have qualified for a World Cup by right, can take heart from the example of South Korea, who stunned Portugal, Italy and Spain to reach the World Cup semi-finals as co-organizers in 2002. "Anything is possible in football," said Hassan. "Every time, one team that nobody expected manages to go far in the competition. Anything can happen."

Coach Sanchez acknowledged that Qatar will face a "big challenge" against the "best teams in the world". His first goal: "Get out of the pool stage". "It's a big responsibility. More than pressure, we feel pride to be able to play in a World Cup," Sanchez said. For Qatar's supporters, among the country's expat-dominated 2.7 million inhabitants, it's a golden chance to see their team compete at the highest level. "We've been talking about the World Cup for 10 years. We really hope they'll be successful," said a young fan in the center of Doha. —AFP