Security fears loom over Africa's football fiesta

Africa Cup of Nations faces its next big worry

YAOUNDE: After overcoming fears of postponement because of the COVID pandemic, the Africa Cup of Nations now faces its next big worry: security. Host nation Cameroon will ceremonially launch the month-long tournament on Sunday when they face Burkina Faso. But the authorities are struggling with separatist gunmen in the west and jihadist raiders in the north - and some fear militants will seize the country's turn in the sporting spotlight to launch attacks. Security forces in the west are on high alert after armed groups sent threatening messages to teams in Group F, gathering Tunisia, Mali, Mauritania and Gambia.

The four teams are scheduled to play in the coastal town of Limbe, and their training site is Buea, a hotspot of separatist unrest. "The threats are very serious," Blaise Chamango, head of an NGO in Buea called Human Is Right, told AFP by phone. "Yesterday, there was an explosion in a takeaway outlet in Limbe. That sent a very powerful message." He added: "The government has stationed heavily armed soldiers at nearly all the crossroads in Buea and Limbe. Security and defense forces are arresting and searching everyone they see in some districts."

Separatist campaign

Buea is the capital of the Southwest Region, which with the neighboring Northwest Region is in the grip of violence sparked by a bid by Cameroon's anglophone minority to secede from the French-majority country. After years of frustration at perceived discrimination, separatists declared a "Federal Republic of Ambazonia" in October 2017. The entity, which has no international recognition, is based on the former British Southern Cameroons, which joined Cameroon after the French colony gained independence in 1960.

More than 3,500 people have died and more than 700,000 have fled their homes. Rights monitors say atrocities and abuses have been committed by both sides.

In his New Year's message, Cameroon's veteran hardline president, 88-year-old Paul Biya, warned that while some independence fighters had handed themselves in, the militants "continue to engage in criminal activity, increasing their use of improvised explosives and killing unarmed civilians". The government's mantra is that "safety will be guaranteed" for AFCON, although neither the authorities nor the Confederation of African Football (CAF) responded to AFP requests for information on security measures.

Cameroon battles separatist gunmen

Jihadist fears

On Monday, the atmosphere in the capital, Yaounde, was more relaxed than in the troubled English-speaking regions some 250 kilometers to the west. A handful of security agents kept half an eye on final preparations at the brand-new Paul Biya Stadium in the district of Olembe, built specially for the CAN and home to the Cameroonian national squad.

"Security is only really a concern in the Northwest and Southwest regions and I think our defence forces have enough experience to respond adequately," said James Mouangue, head of the national human rights commission and a professor of public law. "The security measures put in place are exceptional, given the level of risk, and there were no problems when we hosted the African Nations Championship in January 2021," he noted.

Separatist militants are not the only spectre haunting Cameroon. The country's Far North region, the tongue of land that touches on the troubled Lake Chad region, has in the past suffered cross-border raids by jihadists from neighboring Nigeria. Attacks have fallen back since militants from Boko Haram and the West African branch of the so-called Islamic State group (ISWAP) began a bloody internecine war. But some fear the groups could seek to grab attention by striking in Yaounde, the economic hub Douala or the north itself.

Others, though, say such plans may be too much of a stretch. "I don't think the jihadists can disrupt the Cup unless they carry out a really large attack, even though that remains a possibility," said Guibai Gatama, editor of northern Cameroon's leading twice-weekly publication, L'Oeil du Sahel (The Eye of the Sahel). "The stadium in the North where Group D (comprising Egypt, Nigeria, Sudan and Guinea Bissau) will play is located in Garoua, which is very far from their sphere of operation." — AFP

YAOUNDE: A general view of the Olembe stadium in Yaounde, Cameroon. The African Cup of Nations (CAN) will open in Cameroon on January 9, 2022 in a tense security context, with threats from armed Anglophone separatists on one side and the risk of attacks from Boko Haram and the Islamic State group on the other. —AFP

Egypt will lean on Salah at African showpiece

JOHANNESBURG: Mohamed Salah, in prolific form for Liverpool this season, will lead Egypt against bogey team Nigeria in a blockbuster Group D opener at the Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon. Salah leads all scorers in the Premier League this season with 16 goals, including one in the 2-2 draw with Chelsea on Sunday, his last match before leaving for west Africa. Although Egypt have won a record seven Cup of Nations titles, they have triumphed only twice in seven clashes with three-time champions Nigeria in the competition ahead of the January 11 showdown. Here, AFP Sport puts the spotlight on the four Group D contenders. The group winners and runners-up are assured of last-16 places while the best four third-placed teams from the six groups also qualify.

Egypt

The Pharaohs' Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz has backed Aston Villa forward Mahmoud 'Trezeguet' Hassan to shine at the Cup of Nations although he has not played a full senior match since mid-April due to injury. The 27-year-old was an unused substitute in three Premier League matches during December before coming off the bench for a cameo appearance against Brentford. "Trezeguet is an experienced and good player," former Real Madrid manager and twice Manchester United assistant manager Queiroz said. "I am sure he will be a key figure for us." Unlike most Cameroon-bound teams, Egypt will rely heavily on home-based stars, choosing 19 and only six based abroad, including Salah and Arsenal midfielder Mohamed Elneny.

Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah

Nigeria

A chaotic build-up for Nigeria has included a change of coaches, the loss of a star forward because they requested his release too late, and the withdrawal of several key players due to COVID and injuries. German Gernot Rohr was sacked after the Super Eagles scraped into the final round of 2022 World Cup qualifying and Augustine Eguavoen, who played for Nigeria at the 1994 World Cup, has been placed in temporary charge. He will have to do without in-form Emmanuel Dennis because Premier League club Watford say Nigeria did not alert them in time that they were selecting him, and coronavirus has ruled out another regular scorer, Victor Osimhen of Italian club Napoli. But Nigeria are never more dangerous than when all seems lost. They possess a squad capable of winning the Cup of Nations, or making a humiliating last-16 exit.

Guinea-Bissau

The Djurtus (wild dogs), for decades an African football lightweight, have reached the finals a third consecutive time under coach Baciro Cande. Gritty fighters in qualifiers, the west Africans have struggled at the higher level of the finals, securing just one point from each previous appearance. But a team skippered by goalkeeper Jonas Mendes will be hopeful of a first win when they start against Sudan, a nation they hammered 4-2 in a World Cup qualifier in Omdurman last September. Mendes and forwards Piqueti and Frederic Mendy were part of the 2017 and 2019 campaigns and Porto full-back Nanu and midfielder Moreto Cassama, from French Ligue 1 club Reims, are potential stars.

Sudan

One-time champions Sudan are back after a 10-year absence having used aerial power to upset South Africa in a key qualifier. The Jediane Falcons reached the 2012 quarter-finals, but it is difficult to imagine them repeating that feat under new coach Burhan Tia. He succeeded Frenchman Hubert Velud, who paid the price for winless World Cup and Arab Cup group campaigns. Salah-less Egypt hammered Sudan 5-0 in the Arab Cup while the chances of repeating a 4-0 whipping of Nigeria in 1963 are wafer thin. That leaves Guinea-Bissau as the only realistic hope of a victory. AFP predicts: 1. Egypt, 2. Nigeria, 3. Guinea-Bissau, 4. Sudan. — AFP

Serie A restarts under COVID cloud; Juventus face key month

MILAN: Juventus begin a crucial month for the season with the visit of old rivals Napoli as Serie A returns to action today, with a COVID-19 resurgence looming large over fixtures. Dozens of players among the top division's 20 clubs are out of action with the virus, with Juve captain Giorgio Chiellini one of those sidelined after testing positive and 15 new cases among Verona and Udinese's squads announced on Tuesday. And the rapid spread of the virus has led to stadium capacities being cut back to 50 percent as the Italian government tries to keep the lid on another wave of the pandemic.

Napoli coming to town marks the start of a run of tricky fixtures for Massimiliano Allegri's side, who are fifth, a full 12 points behind league leaders and reigning champions Inter Milan. They also have to take on Roma, AC Milan and Atalanta - who are four points ahead of Juve in the final Champions League spot - all before mid-February. Chiellini's absence and injury to his club and Italy defensive partner Leonardo Bonucci leaves Juve shorn of two of their most influential players, while in attack Paulo Dybala and Federico Chiesa will be on the bench after recovering from injury.

Napoli will arrive in Turin with a long absentee list, largely thanks to players at the Africa Cup of Nations and COVID cases, with coach Luciano Spalletti set to stay at home with COVID after testing positive on Tuesday. Star striker Victor Osimhen, who has already missed a chunk of fixtures with facial fractures, is also positive alongside Hirving Lozano, Eljif Elmas, Kevin Malcuit and Mario Rui, who is however suspended for today's match.

Spalletti's side have a seven-point gap to make up on Inter after a disastrous December in which they ceded top spot and dropped down to third following three straight home defeats, and are also without defensive lynchpin Kalidou Koulibaly and Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa, both at the Cup of Nations. Ready to pounce are AC Milan and Roma, who face off at the San Siro hoping to gain ground in their respective title and Champions League races. Second-placed Milan can extend the three-point gap between them and Napoli while Jose Mourinho's Roma are two behind Juve in sixth.

Worst hit by the virus are Salernitana, who with nine players positive have asked for their match with Venezia - their first since their place in Serie A was saved - to be postponed after health authorities again blocked their players from playing. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khaldiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Shuwaikh	24814507
Chest Hospital	24849400	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Nuzha	22526804
Adan Hospital	23940620	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Qadsiya	22515088
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Dasmah	22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Clinics		Shaab	22518752
Kaizen center	25716707	Qibla	22459381
Rawda	22517733	Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Adaliya	22517144	Mirqab	22456536
		Sharq	22465401

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