

Iran remains 24th in FIFA Ranking, second in Asia

Sports Desk

Iran retained the 24th spot in the latest FIFA Men's Ranking, released by the world football's governing body on Thursday. Team Melli tallied 1553.23 points for the second place among the Asian Football Confederation's member states – standing behind 20th-placed Japan (1588.59pts), which made it to the round of 16 at the World Cup in Qatar last November before suffering a shootout defeat against Croatia and then played to a 1-1 draw against Uruguay and was beaten 2-1 by Colombia in a couple of friendlies on home soil in March. Knocked out in the World Cup group stage under ex-manager Carlos Queiroz, Iran shared the spoils with Russia in a 1-1 draw at Tehran's Azadi Stadium during the latest FIFA international break – thanks



● AHMAD MOEINI JAM/IRNA

to a Mehdi Taremi's second-half equalizer from the spot – in what was new head coach Amir Qalenei's first game in charge. Mohammad Mohebbi and Ramin Rezaeian bagged late goals to help Iran sal-

vage a 2-1 victory over Kenya in a second friendly at home in March. South Korea (27th), Australia (29th), Saudi Arabia (54th), and Qatar (61st) followed the top two in the AFC ranking. Meanwhile, world champion Argentina dethroned Brazil and returned to the top of the FIFA Ranking after a six-year gap. Argentina, which won the World Cup by beating France in a thrilling final, achieved the No. 1 spot after Lionel Scaloni's side beat Panama 2-0 and Curacao 7-0 in friendlies. France moved up one place to second after back-to-back wins against the Netherlands (4-0) and Ireland (1-0) in Euro 2024 qualifiers, while Brazil slipped to third after losing 2-1 away to Morocco in a friendly. Belgium remained fourth and England was fifth, followed by the Netherlands in sixth, Croatia seventh and Italy eighth. Portugal and Spain completed the top 10. The Central African Republic was the biggest mover in the rankings, jumping 10 places to 122nd.

Mbappe angered by PSG's use of his image in advertising campaign



● AHMAD MOEINI JAM/IRNA

Kylian Mbappe on Thursday complained about Paris Saint-Germain's use of a video of him for their season-ticket advertising campaign, before the club removed the footage. PSG's star striker said he would fight for "individual image rights" after an interview with him was used by the club in a video to promote ticket sales for next season, AFP reported.

"At no time was I informed of the content of the interview," Mbappe said on Instagram. "It looked like a basic marketing day. I don't agree with this published video. This is why I am fighting for individual image rights. PSG is a big club and a big family, but it is certainly not Kylian Saint-Germain." French champions PSG later took the video down from their website and YouTube channel, although it can still be viewed on other YouTube channels. France captain Mbappe was the only player to speak in the promotional film. Lionel Messi, who a source told AFP earlier this week is set to leave PSG at the end of this season, was not featured.

Neymar, who is recovering from an ankle injury, did not feature either. PSG did not comment on Mbappe's remarks when contacted. Mbappe has called for individual image rights for players while on international duty with France. Last September he refused to take part in a photo shoot and said he didn't mind "putting myself in the spotlight if it is beneficial for all my teammates, even if it means I get criticised." His actions led the French Football Federation agreeing to modify its agreement with players relating to their image rights.

Miami Heat keep play-offs bid alive, Suns seal fourth seed

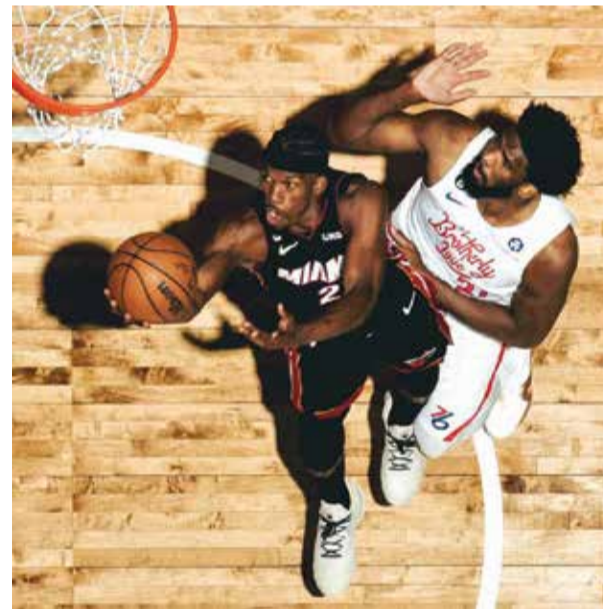
The Miami Heat beat the Philadelphia 76ers to keep their bid to qualify directly for the NBA play-offs alive. The Heat went 10 points up in the first quarter and stayed in front throughout, winning 129-101 with Jimmy Butler and Tyler Herro each scoring 24 points, BBC Sport reported. They are one win behind sixth-placed Brooklyn Nets in the Eastern Conference with two regular-season games left. The top six go straight into the play-offs and avoid having to qualify through the play-in tournament. The 76ers, who are third in the Eastern Conference, have already secured their play-off spot. Elsewhere, Kevin Durant scored 29 points, 12 of them in the final quarter, as the Phoenix Suns sealed the fourth seed in the Western Conference by beating the Denver Nuggets 119-115.

It was the Suns' seventh consecutive win meaning they will enter the post-season, which starts next week, as one of the form teams. The Nuggets clinched the top seed in the West through other results on Wednesday and rested a number of key players. The Utah Jazz will not play in the post-season after they were beaten 114-98 by the Oklahoma City Thunder. The Jazz needed a win to stand any chance of qualifying for the play-in tournament but Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's 22 points helped seal a crucial win for the Thunder. Oklahoma hold the last play-in place in 10th but could still be pipped by the Dallas Mavericks, who have two games to play over the final weekend while the Thunder only have one. The Cleveland Cavaliers, who have already qualified for the play-offs,

ceased to a 118-94 win against the already-eliminated Orlando Magic. Danny Green scored 21 points off the bench in a much-changed Cavaliers side. Keita Bates-Diop scored 25 points as the San Antonio Spurs came from behind to beat the Portland Trail Blazers 129-127 in a match between two teams unable to qualify for the post-season. The Blazers led 119-110 with six minutes remaining but San Antonio scored 13 points without reply, eight of them by Bates-Diop, to set up their win.

▶ Miami Heat's Jimmy Butler (L) goes up to shoot during an NBA victory over the 76ers in Philadelphia, PA, US, on April 6, 2023.

● NBA



Russian, Belarusian gymnasts not involved in war should compete: FIG



● LINDSEY WASSON/REUTERS

Russian and Belarusian gymnasts who are not involved in the war in Ukraine should be allowed to compete, says International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) president Morinari Watanabe. Athletes from both countries have been banned from many sports since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, BBC reported. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has recommended that they compete under a neutral flag. But it has yet to make a decision on the Olympic Games in Paris in 2024. "I understand and support

Ukraine's position on the political side," Watanabe said in an FIG statement. "But sport is independent of politics. Sport must seek peace even when governments and soldiers are at war." In May 2022, Russian gymnast Ivan Kuliak was given a one-year ban for wearing a pro-war symbol on the podium when he was stood next to a Ukrainian gymnast. On 1 April, the Ukrainian government confirmed its athletes would not be allowed to compete in qualifying events for the Paris Games if there are Russian athletes taking part. The IOC said the decision "raises

serious questions about the autonomy of Ukrainian sport." "[Ukraine President] Volodymyr Zelensky protects the Ukrainian people like family," Watanabe added. "I am protecting all gymnasts in the world like family. That's why I support Ukrainian gymnasts and why I defend the right of Russian and Belarusian gymnasts who are not involved in the war to participate in competitions." The FIG says it will discuss the IOC's recommendations for a gradual return to international competition for Russians and Belarusian athletes at a meeting in May.

Development fund allocated for Indonesia's Football Association (PSSI) is being frozen by FIFA after the country was stripped as hosts of this year's Under-20 World Cup, sport's governing body said on Thursday. FIFA barred the Southeast Asian nation from staging

FIFA freezes fund for Indonesia's FA after U-20 World Cup furore

the May 20-June 11 event after the (PSSI) in the predominantly Muslim country said it had cancelled the draw because the governor of Bali refused to host Israel's team, Reuters reported.

Last month protesters marched in the capital Jakarta waving Indonesian and Palestinian flags, demanding that Israel should not be allowed to participate. The removal of the Under-20

event caused anger and dismay among fans and players in the football-mad country. FIFA said in a statement that it "provisionally recommended a restriction on" the use of FIFA Forward develop-

ment funds for the PSSI and would reconsider lifting the sanction after reviewing Indonesia's plan to improve on Indonesian football. PSSI chief Erick Thohir said in a statement that the "ad-

ministrative sanction" would impact PSSI's "operational needs" but did not give further details, reiterating President Joko Widodo's instruction for him to transform the sport, which includes reno-

vating over 20 stadiums. "Indonesia could avoid the severe penalty of being exiled from world football," he said. "This is more like a yellow card, not a red card." FIFA banned Indonesia from playing in international events in 2015 over government meddling.