

Iranian karatekas denied Hungarian visa for world meet



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Sports Desk

Several members of the Iranian karate team will not take part at the upcoming World Senior Karate Championships in Budapest after the Hungarian Embassy in Tehran refused to issue entry visas for them.

The Iranian men's and women's squads left Tehran for the Hungarian capital on Thursday, with male kata representative Ali Zand as well as the country's female kata trio and the whole para karate team missing out on the flight.

Iran will be back at the event – starting Sunday – after being absent in the previous edition in Dubai two years ago due to positive coronavirus test results for several members of the team.

Tokyo Olympic champion Sajjad Ganjzadeh headlines the men's team in Budapest, chasing a second major +84kg gold in less than a month following a top-podium finish at the recently-finished Hangzhou Asian Games. Ganjzadeh will be joined by Ali Meskini (-60kg), Amir-Reza Borzouei (-67kg), Saman Edalati (-75kg), and Mahdi Khodabakhshi (-84kg) in the kumite contests.

Khodabakhshi and Ganjzadeh will also team up with Bahman Askari, Zabi-hollah Poursheib, Saleh Abazari, Mahdi Ashouri, and Mahmoud Ne'mati as Iran will be after a fourth team kumite gold at the World Championships, having dominated the competitions on three successive occasions between 2014 and 2018.

Meanwhile, bronze medalists at the Asian Games Sara Bahmanyar (-50kg) and Fatemeh Sa'adati (-55kg) plus Atousa Golshadnejad (-61kg), Mobina Heidari (-68kg), and Leila Borj-Ali (+68kg) will be the Iranian contestants in the women's kumite contests. The five Iranian girls will be coached by Leila Bahrami, who replaced Farahnaz Arbab right before the competitions.

Iranian Hodaei building on table tennis success at Asian Games



By Mahdijeh Qazvinian
Staff writer

Few Iranians would argue that the final outcome at the recently-finished Hangzhou Asian Games in China was quite what the country's Sport Ministry and the National Olympic Committee had hoped for prior to the multi-sport event.

En route to a seventh-place finish in the medals table, Iran's 285-athlete delegation bagged 13 golds across the 15 days – seven short of the figure the Iranians tallied to end in the sixth spot in Jakarta-Palembang 2018, while it was the lowest for the country since 2006, when Iran grabbed 11 gold medals in Doha.

For all the below-par runs in certain competitions – namely football, weightlifting, and shooting – the country's sporting apparatus still had reasons for joy in other events, in which the Iranians enjoyed some historic achievements.

While Iran celebrated maiden medals in mountain cycling, chess, roller skating, and the artistic gymnastics, the table tennis squad ended country's decades-long drought at the Asian Games, leaving Hangzhou with a couple of bronze medals. Amirhossein Hodaei was part of the Iranian trio, alongside Nima and Noshad Alamian, that stood third in the men's team contests, before the Alamian brothers grabbed a doubles bronze. "It was a massive achievement for the Iranian table tennis as the two bronzes brought an end to the country's 65-year wait for a medal at the Asian Games," Hodaei, who is now in Paris to participate in the French league, said in an interview with Iran Daily.



Iran's Amirhossein Hodaei is in action at the table tennis contests of the Hangzhou Asian Games in September 2023.
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Suffering a 3-1 loss to Hong Kong, the Iranian team emphatically defeated Bahrain and Mongolia for the runner-up spot in the group and a place in the round of 16, where Iran also came out on top in straight matchups against Vietnam.

The pinnacle of Iran's campaign, however, came in the last-eight clash against table tennis powerhouse Japan, which was decided by three nail-biting victories for the Iranians, including Hodaei's five-game win against Maharu Yoshimura – a winner of six team and doubles medals at the World Championships as well as a team silver at the Rio 2016 Olympics.

"No one really expected this victory as the Japanese are among the top teams across the globe, but we gave it our all against them. We had a great team sprit throughout the Games. I wonder if this triumph will ever be repeated again," said the 25-year-old Iranian.

Iran's fairytale run ended after a 3-0 semifinal setback against South Korea, which saw the country share the third podium with the Chinese Taipei, while the host came out victorious against the South Koreans in the final showdown.

"To win a medal at an Asian event takes a lot of effort as China, South Korea and Ja-

pan are the dominant forces of the sport worldwide. Thank God we won the medal, which will hopefully lead to the fans and sporting setup in the country offering more support to the Iranian table tennis from now on." The success in Hangzhou summed up years of hard work for the Iranian, who first came to prominence on the global stage in 2019, when he finished the year as the top-ranked men's under-21 player in the ITTF World Ranking – a feat described by Hodaei as "the best thing that had ever happened to me in my life." "That helped me continue my career overseas. I went

to the German league in 2019 and then played in Hungary, Spain, and Sweden before moving to France two and a half years ago. "I come from a sporting family. My father was a wrestler and my younger brother is also a table tennis athlete. I first started playing table tennis for fun in a park near our home when I was 11, but everyone who watched me playing encouraged me to continue in the complete sport, and then after three years of playing as a professional I joined the Iranian team at the age of 20." Next for Hodaei and his Iranian teammates are the 2024 World Champion-

ships in Busan, South Korea in February.

"The event will also serve as the qualification tournament for the Paris Olympics. A top-10 spot will secure a direct qualification for the Games and I'm sure we'll achieve that, given the talent and quality in our team," Hodaei said.

Asked who he would dedicate his latest medal to, Hodaei said: "My family, of course, and Hamid Ehsani-Mehr, who not only has covered a substantial share of my expenses in some international tournaments, but has also been a great friend and father figure throughout my career."

Barcelona look to recover injured players with Clasico around the corner



REUTERS – Barcelona winger Lamine Yamal and fullback Alejandro Balde returned to training on Thursday as the injury-plagued LaLiga champions prepare to host Athletic Bilbao on Sunday with one eye on next week's Clasico against Real Madrid. Barcelona boss Xavi Hernandez will hope to recover a number of key players in time to face Real, but may have to get creative with his team selection for Bilbao as the champions grapple with injuries to eight first team players, including Polish striker Robert Lewandowski. Midfielder Sergi Roberto is the latest name on the list and will be sidelined for several weeks after suffering a leg injury in training on Wednesday. Barca, who trail Real Madrid by three points at the LaLiga summit, also have to

cope with injuries to Jules Kounde, Frenkie De Jong, Pedri and Raphinha.

Kounde will definitely miss the Real Madrid game next Saturday, but De Jong and Lewandowski have a slim chance of being fit for the Clasico.

Raphinha is said to be progressing well, while Pedri is expected to be back in training soon and could be available for Wednesday's Champions League match against Shakhtar Donetsk. Leaders Real Madrid visit Sevilla today and are set for a reunion with their former defender Sergio Ramos for the first time since he re-joined his childhood team after a couple of seasons at Paris St Germain.

They are expecting to have centre back David Alaba available after he missed international duty with Austria due to a leg injury.

Barcelona's Lamine Yamal (R) is seen in action against Granada's Carlos Neva during a game in Granada, Spain, on October 8, 2023.
JON NAZZA/REUTERS