

Taj urges FIFA to show 'clarity' over Iran's World Cup controversy

Sports Desk

Mahdi Taj, the president of the Iranian Football Federation (FFIRI), said he will seek answers regarding certain issues about Iran's participation at the World Cup – co-hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada from June 11 – in a meeting with FIFA officials in Zurich later this month.

The FFIRI chief – a former member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – made the remarks upon returning to Tehran on Friday, after he and his two colleagues abruptly left Toronto earlier in the week, abandoning their onward trip to Vancouver for the 76th FIFA Congress.

Iran's delegation was the only absentee from the 211-member congress as Thursday's meeting got underway, following a clash with Canadian border officials earlier. While media reports suggested that immigration authorities denied the delegation entry into Canada, Taj insisted that it was their own decision to leave the North American country after exhaustive questioning about his ties with the IRGC – which was listed by Canada as a "terrorist group" in 2024 – and "offensive insults directed at the country's proud armed forces." FIFA sources described the mat-

ter as a "regrettable situation" but insisted that Iran had been invited to attend the congress and that responsibility for deciding who enters the country lay with Canadian authorities.

Despite the latest controversy surrounding Iran's World Cup campaign, FIFA President Gianni Infantino insisted during the congress on Friday that Team Melli will definitely visit the United States to fulfill Group G fixtures against New Zealand, Belgium, and Egypt.

"Let me start by confirming straight away, for those who maybe want to say something else or write something else, that of course Iran will be participating at the FIFA World Cup 2026," Infantino said. "And of course, Iran will play in the United States of America. The reason for that is simple: because we have to unite. We have to bring people together."

"There are enough problems around the world. There are enough people who try to divide all over the world. If nobody tries to unite, what will happen to our world? We have to do it, and we have this opportunity."

However, Taj, blaming the international governing body for "being intimidated by the United States," said that he will have an urgent meeting at FIFA headquarters in the coming weeks to



"reach clarity" over the uncertain situation surrounding the national team.

"I spoke to [FIFA secretary general] Mattias Grafström without hesitation," Taj said. "My colleagues

were surprised at how strongly I spoke. I told him that I had never seen FIFA so weak. I told them they only issue condemnations instead of taking practical action."

"They put the Italian flag in place of Iran's flag, and FIFA only condemned it. The U.S. president said there would be no security for our national team in his country, and you showed no

reaction to his obscene remarks. Now we go to Canada with visas, but we return because of insults, and again FIFA does nothing but condemn," Taj added, referring to a suggestion made by U.S. special envoy Paolo Zampolli in April to replace Iran with Italy at the World Cup, which was firmly rejected by Italian officials.

Taj, who was denied a U.S. entry visa for the World Cup draw ceremony last December, emphasized that the matter is not personal but national: "There are many issues. The World Cup organizers must not allow any flag other than Iran's into the stadiums. We have said the situation has now broadened. They must say what they will do for journalists and spectators, what conditions will be for those of our players who served in the IRGC, and how officials and companions will be accommodated." Taj's concerns were fueled by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's comments last week that some members of the Iranian federation who "have ties to the IRGC" may experience difficulties accompanying the national team in the United States.

Iran is set to begin its World Cup campaign against New Zealand in Los Angeles on June 15, where it is also due to play Belgium six days later, before taking on Egypt in Seattle on June 26.

Iranian libero Hazratpour sets sights on Olympic quota



Iranian libero Mohammadreza Hazratpour is seen in a national team training session in Tehran, Iran, on May 1, 2026. volleyball.ir

Sports Desk

Iranian libero Mohammadreza Hazratpour has declared that securing a quota for the Olympic Games is the primary objective for the national volleyball team ahead of a hectic international season. Iran's 30-man squad, featuring domestic league players, began a training camp on Friday in Tehran for the upcoming FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League, which will start with a daunting test against Brazil in Brasília on June 10. Italian head coach Roberto Piazza's men will also chase a fifth Asian Championship title in eight editions from September 4 in Fukuoka, Japan. Beyond continental glory, additional incentive awaits in Fukuoka as the tournament winner will secure direct qualification to the L.A. 2028 Olympics. A potential showdown between Iran and Japan could

follow at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, which begin on September 19, where Piazza's side will vie for a fourth consecutive men's gold medal.

Speaking on the sidelines of the second session of the preparatory camp, Hazratpour expressed optimism about the team's condition and outlining the high-stakes season ahead.

"We started our training on Friday," Hazratpour said. "Although we have been away from action and training for about two months, fortunately, all the players have entered the camp with excellent physical fitness and high morale." The libero emphasized the significance of the upcoming year and the team's ultimate goal. "We have a very important and difficult year ahead of us. In these critical circumstances, everyone must work hand in hand to first secure the Olympic quota, and then

achieve the best possible results in international competitions," he added.

Hazratpour also spoke about his personal readiness, stating he feels more motivated and energetic than last year. "We have decisive tournaments ahead, such as the Volleyball Nations League (VNL) and the Asian Championship, which represent the chance to qualify for the Olympics." The veteran libero noted that despite some damage to the national team's training hall – caused by the U.S.-Israeli airstrikes – the decision was made to stay in the capital. "Initially, there was a plan to hold the camp in the northern city of Noor, but considering the centralized facilities in Tehran – including the training hall, gym, and restaurant – we preferred to continue our training here. I hope bright days await Iranian volleyball." The training camp will run

until May 20.

Tricky tests will come thick and fast in Week 1 of the VNL preliminaries for Piazza's men, who will take on Bulgaria – finalists at last September's World Championships – on June 11, before facing Argentina and Belgium later in the Brazilian capital.

Iran will then visit Orléans, France, for the second week of action, starting with a mammoth task against the host and reigning Olympic champion France at the CO'Met Arena on June 24. This will be followed by matches against the United States (June 25), Japan (June 26), and Cuba (June 28).

The third and final week of the preliminaries will see the Asian powerhouse go head-to-head with Ukraine in Belgrade on July 15, with further tests against Germany (July 16), Slovenia (July 17), and Turkey (July 19).

Esteghlal leading preparation for WASL qualifiers

Sports Desk

Esteghlal Tehran's basketball team has emerged as the frontrunner among Iranian top-flight contenders to resume training for the country's West Asia Super League qualifiers.

The move comes following a decision by the Iranian Basketball Federation to declare the Premier League season null and void amid the ongoing conflict involving the United States and Israel. With no champion crowned, attention has now turned to a condensed competition

featuring the top four teams from the regular season table to determine who will secure Asia's coveted spot. Shahr-dari Gorgan leads the table with 16 wins from 19 games, level on 35 points with second-placed Esteghlal and Kaleh Mazandaran, while Tabiat sits fourth with 32 points courtesy of 13 wins.

Among these contenders, the Tehran Blues have taken the lead. Not only were they the first club to submit an official letter confirming their readiness to participate in the qualifying tour-

nament, but they have now also broken the training deadlock, positioning themselves as the most serious candidate to claim the valuable Asian quota.

According to an official statement from the club, Esteghlal's first training session will be held on Monday, with the team – led by former Iran head coach Mehran Shahintab – starting to implement physical conditioning and tactical drills in preparation for the upcoming showdown against their rivals.

Esteghlal's Alireza Pour-

bafrani, the team director, confirmed the news in an interview with Varzesh3, stating: "Shahintab, while expressing gratitude to the club's management, the players, and the unwavering support of the fans, has placed special emphasis on the importance of this path. Esteghlal is fully prepared to succeed in these upcoming matches, giving everything to defend the great name of this club."

The national governing body has yet to announce the dates and schedule for the four-team event.

