

Sports Desk

All players in the Iranian national team squad have been granted entry visas by the United States for the upcoming FIFA World Cup – co-hosted by the U.S., Mexico, and Canada from June 11.

US Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack confirmed the visa approvals in a message on X on Friday, just 10 days before Team Melli's opening match in Group G against New Zealand at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles, California. It will be the first iteration of the competition to see a host nation receive the team of a country it is at war with.

The news ended Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee's concerns over the availability of players who have completed their military service with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Tuesday there was "no problem" with the Iran squad entering the country, but Washington would not allow technical and administrative staff with ties to the IRGC to accompany them.

Iranian Fars News Agency, citing The New York Times, reported on Saturday that visas for several members of the Iranian delegation – including Mahdi Taj, chairman of the Iranian Football Federation (FFIRI) and a former IRGC member – have not yet been issued.

Iran squad cleared for US entry; staff denied visas for World Cup

The FFIRI confirmed the report later on Saturday, describing the visa denial as "a non-sporting and entirely political decision" and vowing to pursue the matter through FIFA.

"World football's governing body, as the responsible authority, is tasked with following up on and securing visas for the Iranian national team's managerial, administrative and technical staff.

"The host nation, through its discriminatory and targeted treatment of Iran's national football team, has created a biased and unequal environment, representing one of the clearest examples of political interference in sport," the statement added.

US 'discriminatory treatment'

Iran on Saturday slammed World Cup host the United States over "discriminatory treatment" in not granting visas for some members of the Iranian delegation to the tournament.

"Why do you not say that visas were denied to a large portion of the managerial and executive



Iranian players are pictured ahead of a friendly against Mali in Antalya, Türkiye, on June 4, 2026.

staff, technical advisers, and others who are an integral part of any national football team?" the Iranian Embassy in Turkey said in a post on X, referring to an earlier announcement by US envoy Tom Barrack that visas had been granted to players.

"You have now escalated the deliberate and discriminatory treatment against Iran's national football team to its highest level," the embassy added.

Taj and two of his colleagues abandoned their onward trip to Vancouver for the 76th FIFA

Congress in May, following a clash with Canadian border officials in Toronto. While media reports suggested that immigration authorities denied the delegation entry into Canada, Taj insisted it was their own decision to leave the North Amer-

ican country after exhaustive questioning about his ties to the IRGC – which is listed by Canada and the United States as a "terrorist group" – and "offensive insults directed at the country's proud armed forces."

In late May, Iran moved its training base to Tijuana, Mexico, from Tucson, Arizona, which Taj said was due to visa problems. The Iranian squad left Antalya for Tijuana on Saturday, after two warm-up friendlies in the Turkish resort city.

Qalenoee's men came from behind to beat The Gambia 3-1 last week, before defeating Mali 2-0 courtesy of goals from Saeid Ezzatollahi and Ramin Rezaeian on either side of halftime on Thursday.

The lack of competitive action for the home-based players in the squad has been a major issue for Qalenoee to deal with, after the Iranian top-flight was called off following U.S.-Israeli airstrikes on Iran in February.

Team Melli will return to SoFi Stadium to take on European heavyweight Belgium on June 21, before traveling to Seattle, Washington, to face Egypt in their final group game at Lumen Field five days later.

With eight of the third-placed teams across the 12 groups advancing to the round of 32, Iran will fancy its chances of securing a first-ever knockout-stage berth at the seventh attempt.

Asian Canoe Sprint Junior & U23 Championships: Iranians collect five medals on Day 3

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The morning session of Day 3 at the Asian Canoe Sprint Junior & U23 Championships in Turkistan, Kazakhstan saw Iranians bag one silver and four bronzes across different categories on Saturday, taking the country's medal haul to 15. Iran's lone silver medal of the session came through Elias Bargi in the men's KL2 paracanoe final. The Iranian clocked 2:08.553 to finish second behind an Uzbek paddler, while another representative from Uzbekistan claimed bronze.



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In the men's U23 K1 500m final, Abolfazl Jannati clocked 1:48.892 to finish third and claim the bronze medal behind competitors from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Nika Najafzadeh secured another bronze for Iran in the women's U23 K1 500m final. She posted a time of 2:04.587 to finish third, while paddlers from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took gold and silver, respectively.

Iran's mixed U23 K2 500m duo of Nika Najafzadeh and Darioush Mohammadi also reached the podium, taking bronze in 1:49.042. Uzbekistan won gold, while Ka-

zakhstan finished second.

In the men's U23 C1 500m final, Soheil Bayati crossed the line in 2:06.014 to place sixth. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and India occupied the podium places.

Maryam Aqaei added to Iran's medal count in the junior women's K1 500m final, earning bronze with a time of 2:06.827. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan claimed gold and silver, respectively.

Meanwhile, Nastaran Kheirollahi and Soheil Bayati narrowly missed out on a medal in the mixed U23 C2 500m final, placing fourth with a time of 2:19.038. Kazakhstan,

Uzbekistan and India claimed the top three positions.

In the men's KL3 500m paracanoe event, Masoud Qeysari finished sixth with a time of 2:10.743. Athletes from Uzbekistan and South Korea secured the medals.

Saturday's results came after Iran had collected eight medals, including two golds, on the previous day of competition.

Saeid Hosseinpour won gold in the men's KL1 paracanoe final after clocking 58.436 seconds, while Eslam Jahedi also struck gold in the men's VL2 event, crossing the finish line in 1:03.389.

Ulaanbaatar Open Ranking Series: Iranians bag five Greco-Roman medals, Keshtkar seals Worlds spot

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Iran's Greco-Roman squad finished with five medals, including three golds, at the Ulaanbaatar Open, as Mohammad-Mahdi Keshtkar booked his place in the national team for October's World Championships after securing silver in the 63kg class at the third Ranking Series event of the international season.

Keshtkar was forced to withdraw from the final showdown against Kyrgyzstan's Zholaman Sharshenbekov due to a groin injury, having routed the two-time world champion and Olympic bronze medalist 10-1 when they met in Round 3 of the Nordic bracket earlier on Friday.

Keshtkar's most significant win, however, came in the second round, where he defeated Asian silver medalist Erfan Jarkani 6-2 in an all-Iranian battle to punch his ticket for the world showcase.

Jarkani, who began his campaign with a criteria loss (1-1) to Sharshenbekov, went on to beat India's Sunny Kumar by superiority but failed to progress to the semifinals and finished empty-handed.

"Thank God, after nine months away from competition, I made a strong return to action and achieved a decent result," Keshtkar said, adding: "My victory over renowned Sharshenbekov was extremely valuable for me from a psychological and mental standpoint."

"I suffered a groin strain in my very first bout, and as the competition progressed, the injury became more apparent, which is why, in coordination with the Wrestling Federation and the national team's medical staff, I decided not to compete in the final

in order to prevent the injury from worsening," added the Iranian, who will be eager to improve on last year's world bronze medal.

Elsewhere, Asian bronze medalist Ali Ahmadi-Vafa grabbed gold in the 60kg event, courtesy of a superiority win (10-0) against North Korea's Ro Yu-chol in the final.



Iranian wrestler Mohammad-Mahdi Keshtkar (blue) lifts Kyrgyzstan's Zholaman Sharshenbekov during a Greco-Roman 63kg bout at the Ulaanbaatar Open in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, on June 5, 2026.

Ro, who won the Asian bronze last year, had no chance against the 21-year-old Iranian, who threw the North Korean for two four-point throws from par terre to accumulate nine points, before a lost challenge from Ro added the final point.

Ahmadi-Vafa will look to add a senior Worlds medal to his 2024 junior and U23 world golds, as well as the U17 title he won in 2022.

Friday's results came after Danial Sohrabi had booked his world spot thanks to a comeback 8-5 victory over fellow Iranian Mohammad-Javad Rezaei in a thrilling 72kg final the previous day in the Mongolian capital.

"My entire focus will now be on putting behind the disappointment of last year and achieving the best possible result for my country at the World Championships," said Sohrabi, who suffered a controversial quarterfinal setback against French wrestler Ibrahim Ghanem before rebounding to claim a con-

clusion: "I competed in this tournament at only 40-50 percent of my fitness. Starting today, I am beginning a new phase of preparation for the world showcase."

Payam Ahmadi, meanwhile, enjoyed an emphatic run to the top podium in the 55kg class, throwing down the gauntlet to his opponents ahead of the World Championships – including Georgia's Vakhtang Lolua, who defeated Ahmadi in the final in Zagreb. The 20-year-old Iranian – a winner of junior world and Asian golds last year – outscored his opponents 33-0 across four bouts to claim the gold medal in the Nordic bracket, including a final victory (9-0) over Turkish wrestler Emin Cakir.

With Sohrabi and Keshtkar joining Ahmadi-Vafa, Ahmadi, reigning world and Olympic champions Saeid Esmaeili (67kg) and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg), Asian silver medalist Ali Oskou (77kg), world champion Gholamreza Farrokhi (82kg), and Alireza Mohmadi (87kg) – who has won consecutive world silver medals on either side of his Olympic silver at Paris 2024 – in the Iranian Greco-Roman squad for the Wrestling Worlds, the remaining spot up for grabs will be decided through a highly anticipated 130kg showdown between Amin Mirzazadeh and Fardin Hedayati at the International Takhti Cup, which begins on June 15 in Kerman.

Two-time world champion and Olympic bronze medalist Mirzazadeh will need a victory in a best-of-three contest against Hedayati, who is aiming for a breakthrough at senior level, having already collected three world titles across the U23 and junior age groups.