

## In-form Salah adjusts sights to World Cup as Egypt aim for top



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah (center) warms up with teammates before their English Premier League football match against Manchester City at Anfield in Liverpool, northwest England, on Sunday. — AFP

**JOHANNESBURG:** Mohamed Salah, fresh from scoring a brilliant goal for Liverpool against Manchester City, switches his attention to 2022 World Cup qualifying this week as Egypt hope to get their campaign back on track. The record seven-time African champions face surprise Group F leaders Libya at home and away and need at least four points to take over first place ahead of the final two rounds during November.

Only the 10 group winners advance to the final qualifying round and Egypt and fellow first seeds Cameroon, Ghana, Morocco and the Democratic Republic of Congo have catching-up to do. AFP Sport looks at the situation in each group with 41 matchday two, three and four qualifiers scheduled for next week.

### Group A

Riyad Mahrez-captained reigning African champions Algeria have an impressive home record against Niger in World Cup qualifying, scoring 10 unanswered goals in two matches. Another convincing home win is on the cards for a team boasting an African record 29-match unbeaten run, but second-place Burkina Faso are likely to remain level on points with Algeria by defeating Djibouti.

### Group B

Table-toppers Tunisia have won all four previous World Cup qualifiers against Mauritania and there is nothing to suggest they will not extend that perfect record in Rades. A Tunisian side captained by Saint-

Etienne's Wahbi Khazri and coached by Mondher Kebaier enter the match boosted by two impressive victories while the Mauritians have disappointed when losing twice.

### Group C

It is difficult to imagine any result in Lagos other than a comfortable victory for leaders Nigeria over the Central African Republic, who will lack unavailable Atletico Madrid midfielder Godfrey Kondogbia. After a routine home win over Liberia last month, a severely weakened Super Eagles side triumphed away to Cape Verde and they will be back to near full strength for the visit of the Wild Beasts.

### Group D

Considered the toughest section to win as rivals Cameroon and the Ivory Coast have qualified for the World Cup 10 times between them. The Ivorians hold a one-point lead thanks to a 2-1 home win over the Cameroonians, but the poor state of the pitch at the recently opened national stadium in Abidjan means they must host Malawi in Benin.

### Group E

Mali have made a good start in the only section that does not contain a previous World Cup qualifier, build-

ing a two-point advantage over Kenya and Uganda with Rwanda last. A Malian squad including Southampton midfielder Moussa Djenepo are handicapped by having to play home matches in Morocco due to the poor state of their stadiums, but they are favored to beat Kenya.

### Group F

Libya stole a march on Egypt by snatching a late home victory over Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's Gabon and then winning in Angola. After shading Angola, Egypt were lucky to hold Gabon and the draw cost coach Hossam el Badry his job with former Real Madrid manager and Manchester United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz taking over.

## Egypt plays Libya home and away

### Group G

Pacesetters South Africa face bogey team Ethiopia, who took four points off them in 2014 qualifiers, leading to Bafana Bafana (The Boys) coaches Pitso Mosimane and Gordon Igesund being sacked. Ghana and Zimbabwe will have new coaches for back-to-back meetings with Serb Milovan Rajevac replacing Charles Akonnor at the Black Stars and

Norman Mapeza succeeding Croat Zdravko Logarusic at the Warriors.

### Group H

Sadio Mane's Senegal could seal first place with two victories over closest challengers Namibia, another country affected by stadium standards and forced to host matches in neighboring South Africa. The biggest threat to the Senegalese will probably come from Peter Shalulile, a consistent scorer for Mamelodi Sundowns, the dominant club in South Africa.

### Group I

Morocco, whose first choice line-up includes star Sevilla forward Youssef en-Nesyri, will play 'away' matches against Guinea-Bissau and Guinea at home, giving them a huge advantage. Leaders Guinea-Bissau do not have an international-standard stadium while FIFA currently considers Guinea an unsafe destination after a coup forced Morocco to flee Conakry last month.

### Group J

Tanzania were seeded fourth, but lead Benin on goals scored with section favorites DR Congo third and without a win despite two goals from recalled 35-year-old Dieumerci Mbokani. The top two meet in Dar es Salaam and Cotonou and former Aston Villa forward Mbwana Samatta captains a Tanzanian team coached by Dane Kim Poulsen. — AFP

## Union deplores 'lack of vision' with biennial World Cup

**PARIS:** The world footballers' union FIFPro attacked the "lack of holistic vision" of the game's institutions, including FIFA's proposal for a biennial World Cup, with its general secretary, saying the debates were prompted by "commercial interests". Speaking by videoconference on the sidelines of the presentation yesterday of a report on the playing demands of professional players, Jonas Baer-Hoffmann called for a "reasonable and effective reform" to lighten the burden on footballers and reduce the chance of injury.

"There is an absolute lack of holistic vision and leadership from most of the institutions," he said about FIFA's proposal for a biennial World Cup. "It is very much a transactional affair in which proposals, whether good, bad or ugly for football have very little basis for a conversation or consultation, because everything is aligned to the commercial interests of different competitions. That really undermines our chance to have a reasonable and effective reform. We would really like to try to differentiate between conversations about the calendar and that about competitions. These are two very separate conversations."

The debate around the international calendar and a World Cup every two years has been revived in recent weeks by ex-Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger, FIFA's head of global development. Wenger says the idea would be to have a final phase every summer from 2025-2026, alternating World Cups and continental tournaments like the European Championships and

Copa America. Qualifying matches would be grouped together in October, or in October and March.

He refutes the argument that the players would face increased strain, arguing that they would have to make fewer long journeys and would have a minimum of 25 days rest after playing in summer tournaments for their countries. A full report is due to be released by FIFA in November, ahead of a "global summit" by the end of the year. The idea has already led to widespread criticism from managers, while UEFA has been scathing in its response but FIFPro struck a more pragmatic approach.

"Condensing windows is an interesting one," said Jonas Baer-Hoffmann. "We had a first meeting with FIFA about this about a week ago. There is a lot in this whole proposal we still need to look at and analyze. Reducing windows would be a positive as it would reduce travel. FIFA are also suggesting going from 10 games we have in the current window down to seven. I see upsides for coaches who would have more time to work with players, so there is merit."

He warned, however, that the biennial competition could just make the rich football nations richer at the expense of developing countries. "The entire potential thought process for innovation is being put into the peak of the pyramid," he said. "The notion seems to be: 'let's generate as much money there as possible and then there might be some trickle-down to help the pyramid out'. I don't think that's working particularly well." — AFP

## eFootball fiasco symptom of growing rush to bring out games

**TOKYO:** The scathing reviews of the "grotesque" eFootball 2022 and its "horrible" graphics are a potent illustration of the risks posed by increasing pressure to rush video games to market, experts say. The latest edition of the game previously known as Pro Evolution Soccer was meant to offer something to compete with undisputed football game champion FIFA, with maker Konami opting for a free-to-play model to attract fans.

But the release was almost universally panned, with just a 10 percent positive rating on game platform Steam days after its release. With players crying foul, Japanese gaming giant Konami last week apologized and promised to take the criticism into account as it updated eFootball.

It was all too reminiscent of the outcry that followed the disastrous launch of Cyberpunk 2077, which was riddled with bugs and was withdrawn from Sony's PlayStation store just a week after its release. "This kind of thing is becoming more prevalent, sadly," said Mia Consalvo, Canada research chair in games studies at Concordia University.

Part of the issue is simply the increasing sophistication of video games, "leading to many more chances for bugs to emerge", she told AFP. "Some can be really difficult to fix, while others may not appear unless certain conditions are met and possibly were missed in official game testing."

Developers and publishers face increasing financial pressure to get games out "so they can start generating revenue, particularly if they have already been in development for several years", Consalvo said. That pressure may have been especially acute for a free title such as eFootball, which relies on in-game purchases including upgraded strips for revenue.

Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto is said to have declared that "a delayed game is eventually good, but a rushed game

is forever bad", but experts say that maxim may no longer hold. "Since the appearance of hard drives on consoles, it's become possible to 'repair a game'. You can do patches, you can make important changes," said Daniel Andreyev, an author and journalist specializing in video games.

### 'You can only launch once'

That has created an environment where developers and publishers know they can go back in and fix problems after release — a risky gamble. "Sometimes, they cut corners to finish on time and hope nobody will notice the flaws, but occasionally, they miss badly," said Michael Pachter, an analyst at Wedbush. "It's likely that all games are rushed out, but only a handful are flawed enough to trigger controversy."

That's what has happened with eFootball and Cyberpunk 2077, said Serkan Toto, an analyst at Kantan Games in Tokyo. "These games were brought to market broken beyond repair, with management totally ignoring the production side, which of course always knows if their titles are not ready for release yet," he told AFP.

Putting out a buggy game is a risky move, particularly at a time when fans have more avenues than ever to vent their discontent. "You can only launch every game once, and you need to nail that," added Toto. "If not, everything after that is pure damage control, which costs nerves, money and resources." And while pre-orders aren't affected by post-release griping, there can be a reputational effect that impacts future business, Consalvo said. That's what happened with WWE 2K20, which was released in 2019 and is among the 100 worst-rated games on Steam, with eFootball currently at the bottom. The reception was so bad that the game's publisher decided not to bring out another version the following year.

But a buggy launch is not always a death knell for a game. Cyberpunk 2077 returned to the PlayStation store six months after its debut and now has mostly positive reviews on Steam. And survival and space exploration game No Man's Sky, which was missing promised features such as multi-player mode at its launch, has gone on to surpass initial expectations with a significant community of players and mostly positive reviews. — AFP