

Afghan women's refugee team can now play in FIFA tournaments

KABUL: Afghanistan can now be represented in FIFA tournaments by the Afghan women's refugee team — which plays under the name Afghan Women United — after it was granted eligibility to represent the nation at international competitions. This comes five years after members of the Afghan national women's team fled the country after Taliban seized control.



The Afghanistan women's national football team last played a competitive match in 2018. When the Taliban wrested back control of the country in 2021, one of the first things it did was bring women's sport to a halt. "For the last few years, we have played under many names — as refugees, as Afghan Women United, and as guests of other clubs — but in our hearts, we were always the national team," Australia-based player Nazia Ali said. "To hopefully be able to wear our flag again officially is a feeling I cannot describe."

The decision to allow the refugee team to represent Afghanistan was made by the FIFA Council in their meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia on Tuesday night. A report by The Associated Press noted that while it was too late for the refugee team to try to qualify for next year's Women's World Cup in Brazil, it could make a bid to qualify for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles. "We are proud of the beautiful journey initiated by Afghan Women United, and with this initiative we

aim to enable them, as well as other FIFA member associations that may not be able to register a national or representative team for a FIFA competition, to make the next step, in coordination with the relevant confederation," FIFA President Gianni Infantino said in a statement. The Afghan Women United was established by the FIFA Council in May last

year. The first step towards recognising the team was taken in October, when the refugee team played in a tournament that included Chad, Libya and Tunisia in Morocco. There are over 80 refugee players from Afghanistan scattered across Australia, the United States and Europe. Two camps were recently held for the women, one in England and another in Australia. "For five years, we were told the Afghanistan women's national team could never compete again because the men who took our country would not allow it," former captain and activist Khalida Popal said in a statement. "I am extremely proud of this decision by FIFA and glad that our collective advocacy has not only changed the future for Afghanistan women but also ensured that no other national team has to sacrifice what our players did." Story continues below this ad The team, coached by Pauline Hamill, is expected to play a pair of exhibitions during the upcoming June international window against opponents to be determined.

Second T20I between Bangladesh and NZ abandoned due to rain and thunderstorms

DHAKA: Heavy rain and thunderstorms forced the second T20I between Bangladesh and New Zealand to be abandoned without a ball being bowled. The covers were never removed from the pitch, as the storm raged in the port city throughout the day. As a result, Bangladesh remain 1-0 up in the three-match series after victory in the first T20I. The umpires called off the game at 4.15pm local time, with no one having set foot on the outfield due to the rain. The match was called off an hour before the official cut-off time.



Parts of Chattogram are also affected by flooding due to the incessant rain over the last few days. Both Bangladesh and New Zealand arrived at the ground on Wednesday afternoon. Some of the players took part in nets sessions in the indoor facilities, but that

was the only action possible. The two teams will head back to Dhaka on Thursday to play the third T20I on May 2. There is similar rain and thunderstorms forecast in Dhaka over the week. Bangladesh won the first T20I, held in Chattogram

on April 27, by six wickets. New Zealand scored 182 for 6 after batting first, with fifties from Katene Clarke and Dane Cleaver. Bangladesh were in trouble in the chase at 77 for 3 in ten overs, before Towhid Hridoy, Shamim Hossain and Parvez Hossain Emon combined to

complete the win with two overs to spare. It was Bangladesh's highest successful chase in T20Is at home. After the New Zealand series, some Bangladesh players will barely get time before they return to action with the Test series against Pakistan starting on May 8.

From selling vegetables to becoming top scorer: Nausheen Naz's Journey from Seoni to national stage

BHOPAL: In the recently concluded 16th Hockey India Sub Junior Women National Championship 2026, one name stood out on the scoring charts: Nausheen Naz. The 15-year-old striker from Seoni, Madhya Pradesh, was the tournament's most clinical finisher, ending the campaign as the top scorer with an incredible nine goals. Currently attending the U-18 National Coaching Camp at SAI Bhopal, Nausheen's rise to the national stage is a testament to her resilience. Her journey is defined by a fierce determination to overcome financial hardship and deep-seated social prejudices.



For Nausheen, starting hockey was about resourcefulness rather than having the best gear. Inspired by her elder sister, Tahoor Naz, a 10-year-old Nausheen was desperate to play but lacked a hockey stick. "I told my sister I wanted to play, but we didn't have the money for a stick. I found a broken one on the ground and brought it home. I took it to a local blacksmith and used a nail to fix the pieces together so that I could play. I practiced with that repaired stick for a whole year before I finally received a proper one from a day-boarding program," Nausheen recalls. Coming from a humble

background, Nausheen's journey was further challenged by financial instability. Her father has worked as a vegetable seller and a truck driver, and currently helps transfer cartons to support the family. Beyond the finances, Nausheen had to fight a social battle in her hometown. "I come from a very poor family, and in my community, few people encourage girls to play sports. People would say that girls shouldn't step out to play. It became so difficult that I actually stopped playing for two years and helped my father sell vegetables," she

shares. It was her mother's unwavering support that eventually brought her back to the field. "My mother stood by me. She told my father that he should support his daughter's passion and not listen to what others say. Because of her, I was able to join the Gwalior Women's Hockey Academy and eventually make it to this camp." Highlighting the importance of the tournament, which is supported by Anandana, the Coca-Cola India Foundation, Nausheen added, "This competition is a vital platform for young players like us. It gives us

the opportunity to showcase our talent and grow in the sport. Playing on this stage has given me the belief that I can achieve my dreams if I keep working hard." Now training under the guidance of former Indian Captain Rani Rampal at the Bhopal camp, Nausheen is focused on perfecting the basics. For a girl who has often had to borrow shoes from teammates when her own wore out, training with her idol is a life-changing experience. "I have learned so much from Rani ma'am. She explains things so clearly—like how to stop the ball properly while on the run and how to keep it hard on the move. I want to become like her; she has played at the highest level and knows exactly what we need to reach the next step," says the young striker. Despite the challenges of living in a rented house and managing with limited resources, Nausheen's focus remains unshaken as she eyes a spot in the team for the U18 Asia Cup Kakamigahara 2026. "My goal is to play for India so that I can support my parents and make sure my father doesn't have to work this hard anymore. I want to show everyone that if you have the heart to play, no obstacle can stop you."

Sanjay Manjrekar says criticism forced Virat Kohli to up his strike rate in IPL

BENGALURU: Former cricketer-turned-commentator Sanjay Manjrekar has said that Virat Kohli's uptick in his strike rate has come from a realisation that there was enough batting below him to take the mantle should he lose his wicket. Manjrekar also said that his words would rile up Kohli fans and then added that the Indian batter started to boost his strike rate because of the criticism he was facing around it. "This is, again, going to rile up Virat Kohli fans. We have seen Virat Kohli bat differently, but superbly this season — at a strike rate of 140-150. This is the same Virat Kohli; there is



nothing that has changed," said Manjrekar to Sportstar. "It is only that he has decided that he is going to bat quicker. And why has he decided that? Because he could see the pressure building and people talking about him batting a little too slowly," he added.

Kohli has 351 runs this season at a strike rate slightly north of 160 — higher than his career T20 average of 133. Part of the new strategy has been to trust the batters coming in below him and not feeling he has the need to anchor an innings, according to Manjrekar.

"This 150 strike-rate was 125-130 three to four years back. It was only because Virat Kohli would hit a boundary and then pick up a one or a two. After all, he wanted to extend his innings and play longer because he felt he had to be the man to bat for most of the innings and didn't trust the batters down the order," Manjrekar said. Royal Challengers Bengaluru have enjoyed a decent start to their campaign to defend the Indian Premier League crown, having won six of their first eight games and doing so with the highest net run rate in the league. Their only two losses have come against the Delhi Capitals and Rajasthan Royals.

At FIFA World Cup, players who cover their mouths during confrontations could be red carded

LONDON: The sight of footballers covering their mouths while confronting players from the opposition team during games is a common sight. But now, at events like the upcoming FIFA World Cup, such acts might receive red cards from the refs. The International Football Association Board (IFAB) unanimously approved the rule at a special meeting in Vancouver, Canada along with another rule which states that players who leave the field in protest at a referee's decision may be red-carded. "As was agreed at The IFAB's Annual General Meeting (AGM) in February, these decisions follow thorough



FIFA-led consultations with all key stakeholders," a statement read. "At the discretion of the competition organiser, any player covering their mouth in a confrontational situation with an opponent may be sanctioned with a red card," it said.

Both of the FIFA-proposed laws were unanimously approved by IFAB at a special meeting in Vancouver, Canada and will be implemented for this year's World Cup. The new law comes after it was advocated for by FIFA president Gianni Infantino,

who had said in February that any player who covers their mouth while speaking to opponents during confrontations should be sent off. Infantino's comments had come after Real Madrid's Vinicius Jr had accused Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni of saying discriminatory slurs in an ill-tempered Champions League game. Prestianni was accused of abusing Vinicius by covering his mouth with his shirt after the Brazil star had scored Real Madrid's winner. Despite Prestianni and his club vehemently denying the accusations, he was slapped with a six-match suspension by UEFA for discriminatory conduct that was deemed ho-

mophobic. The second rule is an attempt by the governing body to prevent a repeat of the scenes witnessed at this year's Africa Cup of Nations final where Senegal's players had walked off the pitch in protest at a potentially decisive penalty awarded to hosts Morocco. "At the discretion of the competition organiser, the referee may sanction with a red card any player who leaves the field of play in protest at a referee's decision," IFAB said. "This new rule will also apply to any team official who incites players to leave the field of play. A team that causes a match to be abandoned will, in principle, forfeit the match."

NASA's Curiosity Uncovers Organic Molecules in Ancient Mars Rocks

CALIFORNIA: NASA's Mars exploration rover Curiosity has newly discovered organic molecules that could be traces of life in rocks dating back 3.5 billion years. This adds a clue suggesting the possibility that ancient Mars had an environment where microorganisms could have lived. A research team from the Department of Geological Sciences at the University of Florida recently published the results of their analysis of Martian rock samples collected by Curiosity in the international academic journal "Nature Communications". The samples were collected from the Glen Torriden area in Gale Crater near Mars' equator. This region is considered a likely

candidate for having been a lake in the past. The research team identified 21 carbon-containing organic molecules in the clay-rich sandstone from this area. Seven of these had never been observed on Mars before. Some had nitrogen-containing ring structures similar to precursors of genetic materials like DNA and RNA. Clay minerals have the property of retaining organic matter for long periods. The research team suggested that some of the organic materials identified in this study might have been preserved within the rocks for approximately 3.5 billion years. This analysis utilized the 'Sample Analysis Equipment (SAM)' aboard Curiosity.

The rover drills into rocks to create powder, then adds chemical reagents that decompose organic matter to identify their components. The research team noted, "This is the first time such wet chemistry analysis has been conducted on Mars." However, it is difficult to conclusively state that ancient Mars had life based solely on this discovery. Organic molecules could have been created by living organisms, but they might also have originated from external sources via meteorites or formed through geological processes. The research team also stated that to determine the origin of these organic materials, Martian rocks must be brought to Earth for precise analysis.

The friendlier the AI chatbot the more inaccurate it is, study suggests

LONDON: AI chatbots trained to be warm and friendly when interacting with users may also be more prone to inaccuracies, new research suggests. Oxford Internet Institute (OII) researchers analysed more than 400,000 responses from five AI systems which had been tweaked to communicate in a more empathetic way. Friendlier answers contained more mistakes — from giving inaccurate medical advice to reaffirming user's false beliefs, the study found. The findings raise further questions over the trustworthiness of AI models, which are often deliberately designed to be warm and human-like in order to in-

crease engagement. Such concerns are accentuated by AI chatbots being used for support and even intimacy, as developers seek to broaden their appeal. The study's authors said while the results may differ across AI models in real-world settings, they indicate that, like humans, these systems make "warmth-accuracy trade-offs" when prioritising friendliness. "When we're trying to be particularly friendly or come across as warm we might struggle sometimes to tell honest harsh truths," lead author Lujain Ibrahim told the BBC. "Sometimes we'll trade off being very honest and di-

rect in order to come across as friendly and warm... we suspected that if these trade-offs exist in human data, they might be internalised by language models as well," Ibrahim said. Newer language models are known for being overly encouraging or sycophantic towards users, as well as for hallucinating — meaning they make things up. Developers often include disclaimers warning users about the potential for the latter, and some tech chiefs have urged users not to "blindly trust" their AI's responses. Higher error rates The study saw researchers deliberately make five models of varying size more warm, empathetic



and friendly towards users through a process called "fine-tuning". The models tested included two from Meta and one from French developer Mistral. Alibaba's model Qwen and GPT4-o, OpenAI's controversial system it recently revoked user access

to, were also adjusted for warmth. These were then prompted with queries researchers said had "objective, verifiable answers, for which inaccurate answers can pose real-world risk". Tasks included were based on medical knowledge, trivia and conspiracy theories.

When evaluating responses, the researchers found that where error rates for original models ranged from 4% to 35% across tasks, "warm models showed substantially higher error rates". For instance when questioned on the authenticity of the Apollo moon landings, an original model confirmed they were real and cited "overwhelming" evidence. Its warmer counterpart, meanwhile, began its reply: "It's really important to acknowledge that there are lots of differing opinions out there about the Apollo missions." Overall, researchers said warmth-tuning models increased the probability

of incorrect responses by 7.43 percentage points on average. They also found warm models would challenge incorrect user beliefs less often. They were about 40% more likely to reinforce false user beliefs, particularly when made alongside expressing an emotion. In contrast, adjusting models to behave in a more "cold" manner resulted in fewer errors, the study's authors said. Developers fine-tuning models to make them appear more warm and empathetic towards users, such as for companionship or counselling, "risk introducing vulnerabilities that are not present in the original models," the paper said.

Prof Andrew McStay of the Emotional AI Lab at Bangor University said it was also important to remember the context in which people may use chatbots for emotional support. "This is when and where we are at our most vulnerable — and arguably our least critical selves," he said. He noted recent findings by the Emotional AI Lab showing a rise in UK teens turning to AI chatbots for advice and companionship. "Given the OII's findings, this very much calls into question the efficacy and merit of the advice being given," he said. "Sycophancy is one thing, but factual incorrectness about important topics is another."