

France players sidelined ahead of final

France squad struck by cold virus as Argentina final looms

Raphael Varane and Ibrahima Konate the latest to fall ill

Reuters

France's World Cup final preparations were rocked as three more players were forced to miss training with cold-like symptoms yesterday just two days before their showdown with Argentina.

Raphael Varane, Ibrahima Konate and Kingsley Coman were all sidelined as Les Bleus prepare to take on Lionel Messi and Argentina in Sunday's final.

The trio of absentees sparked further fears of a mystery virus in the French camp after two players -- Adrien Rabiot and Dayot Upamecano -- were ruled out of the semi-final win over Morocco.

Rabiot and Upamecano both returned to training yesterday.

Coman, the Bayern Munich winger, had already been forced to miss a training session on Thursday because of a "light



Raphael Varane, Steve Mandanda and Ibrahima Konate of France sing their national anthem prior to a match

viral syndrome", the French Football Federation (FFF) said.

France forward Randal Kolo Muani sought to play down the illnesses yesterday.

"There is little bit of flu going around but nothing serious," he said.

Earlier this week, France coach Didier Deschamps suggested frigid air conditioning might be to blame for the illness-

es in the French squad.

"The air conditioning is on all the time and so we have had a few cases of flu-like symptoms but we will try to avoid it spreading," Deschamps said.

"The players put in so much effort on the pitch and so their immune systems suffer. Your body is weakened and you are more prone to getting infected."



France are aiming to become the first team to win back-to-back World Cups since Brazil achieved the feat in 1962 as Argentina captain Messi looks to crown his glorious career with the one major title that has eluded him

"We're not scared of that virus. Dayot and Adrien got a bit of a stomach ache, I made them a ginger and honey tea and then they felt better. I hope everyone will be ready for the final"

OUSMANE DEMBELE

Today's matches

Croatia v Morocco 6PM

reaching fever pitch, with the cheapest tickets on the secondary market changing hands for more than \$4,000.

Ticket protests

Yesterday, Argentina fans who have flooded into the host country for the tournament staged a second day of demonstrations outside a Doha hotel, demanding their country's national federation help them find tickets for Sunday's showpiece.

Cintia Echanis, 51, told AFP the protesters wanted access to tickets at face value.

"We don't want problems. What we want as Argentines is to have the chance to cheer for Argentina again," she said.

Sunday's final will bring the month-long football tournament, one of the most controversial World Cups in history, to a close.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino shrugged off criticism of the event yesterday, describing it as the "best World Cup ever".

"The World Cup has been an incredible success on all fronts," Infantino added.

"The main one being the fans, the behaviour, the joyful atmosphere, the bringing of people together. The fans meeting the Arab world, it has been very important for the future of all of us."

Infantino said the tournament had exceeded revenue predictions in the four-year cycle leading to 2022, rising to a record \$7.5 billion -- \$1 billion more than the previous four-year period leading to the 2018 World Cup.

France's Dembele says no room for sentiment for Messi

AFP

France star Ousmane Dembele has admitted he will have no room for sentiment for Lionel Messi in Sunday's World Cup final as the holders look to retain the trophy when they face Argentina.

The final represents the last chance for Messi, now 35, to win football's greatest prize -- he has already suggested he will not play again at a World Cup.

"With the great career he has had it would be good if he won the World Cup, but we also want to win it," Dembele, who played alongside Messi for four years at Barcelona, told reporters yesterday.

"We are France, we are fighting for our country, for our team, to finish the job after all we have done to get here.

"It is true that this is the tro-



Ousmane Dembele

phy he is missing, but we are also here to make our country proud. I hope France win it."

The 25-year-old Dembele has been a key player for France, starting every game on their run to the final except their defeat

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OUSMANE DEMBELE

by Tunisia in their final group match, when they had already qualified for the knockout stage.

It is a change from 2018, when he made four appearances in France's victorious campaign in Russia but featured for just two minutes in the knockout rounds and did not play at all as Les Bleus beat Belgium in the

semi-final and then Croatia in the final.

The French team has changed considerably since then, not least because key players such as N'Golo Kante, Paul Pogba and Lucas Hernandez are now missing due to injury.

But Dembele also said that the experience of having won the trophy last time means the mood in the French camp is very different this time.

"There are some similarities, but 2018 was something else. There were more crazy guys in the team," he joked.

"We have a great atmosphere this time, but 2018 was our first final in 20 years, it's not the same.

"There is much more calmness, more experience after 2018. We were a bit more euphoric at the time after we beat Belgium in the semi-final.

FIFA to 'revisit' plan to scrap four-team groups: Infantino

AFP

FIFA looks set to revise plans to introduce three-team groups for the 2026 World Cup, world football chief Gianni Infantino said yesterday.

FIFA had previously indicated that the 2026 finals, which will expand to 48 teams from 32, would see countries divided into 16 groups of three during the first round.

Under that format, the top two teams in each group would advance to a 32-team knockout tournament.

However, FIFA president Infantino said the thrilling success of the existing first-round format at the 2022 World Cup -- where teams were divided into traditional groups of four -- had prompted a rethink.

Several groups went down to the wire, with qualification hanging in the balance until the final whistle.

"The groups of four have been absolutely incredible until the last minute of the last match," Infantino told a press



Gianni Infantino

"We have to revisit or at least rediscuss the format, whether it's 16 groups of three or 12 groups of four. This is something that will be on the agenda in the next few weeks"

GIANNI INFANTINO

conference. "We have to revisit or at least rediscuss the format, whether it's 16 groups of three or 12 groups of four. This is something that will be on the agenda in the next few weeks."

Santos quits as Portugal coach with Mourinho tipped as possible successor

AFP | Lisbon

Fernando Santos quit as coach of Portugal on Thursday following the team's shock World Cup quarter-final loss to Morocco with colourful and controversial Jose Mourinho named as a leading candidate to take over.

The Portuguese football federation (FPF) said in a statement that an agreement was reached with the 68-year-old Santos "to end the journey of great success that began in September 2014".

The FPF added that it "will now launch the process to choose the next national coach".

Daily sports newspaper Record claims that Mourinho is the federation's number one target to take over ahead of qualifying for Euro 2024.

They would even reportedly entertain a deal which would see Mourinho take charge of



Fernando Santos

the national team on an interim basis to allow him to see out the season with club side Roma in Italy.

Asked about the national team job by journalists late Thursday afternoon when he arrived in southern Portugal for a training camp with Roma, Mourinho made no comment.

Qualifying for Euro 2024 gets underway in March.

Portuguese coaches Rui Jorge (under-21s), Abel Ferreira (Palmeiras), Paulo Fonseca

Mourinho has yet to coach at international level but has an impressive record at some of Europe's heavyweight clubs. He has managed Porto, Chelsea twice, Inter Milan, Real Madrid and Manchester United



Jose Mourinho

League titles with Chelsea, two Serie A crowns at Inter and a Liga triumph at Real.

He also coached Porto to 2004 Champions League victory and repeated the feat with Inter Milan in 2010.

In May this year, he led Roma to the Europa Conference League title, the club's first ever major European trophy.

That was his fifth European title and made him the first coach to win all current UEFA competitions.

(Lille), Rui Vitoria (Egypt) and Jorge Jesus (Fenerbahce) are also among the potential candidates cited by local media.

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Mourinho won three Premier

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