

Morocco carry a huge weight of expectation into their opening game at the Africa Cup of Nations, AFCON on Sunday as the hosts, with star man Achraf Hakimi returning from injury, aim to see off stiff competition to claim continental glory.

Senegal, reigning champions Ivory Coast, Mohamed Salah's Egypt and a Nigeria side led by Victor Osimhen are among the biggest rivals for Morocco at the AFCON, which runs into the New Year with the final on January 18.

Morocco, Africa's best team in the FIFA rankings in 11th place, kick off the tournament on Sunday at 1900 GMT against minnows Comoros at the new 69,000-seat Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat.

There is huge pressure on the Atlas Lions, semi-finalists at the 2022 World Cup who come into the Cup of Nations on a world-record run of 18 consecutive victories.

"I have always said the objective is to win this AFCON at home in front of our fans," coach Walid Regragui insisted on Saturday.

"The country that will have the most difficulty winning the AFCON is Morocco, because of the expectation on us," he nevertheless warned as they look to claim the title for the first time since 1976.

"The pressure on us is positive, but anything other than victory will be a failure."

Paris Saint-Germain right-back Hakimi, the African player of the year, says he is ready to take part despite not having played since suffering an ankle injury in early November.

"I feel good," said Hakimi, although Regragui admitted that the former Real Madrid man may not play against Comoros with further Group A matches to come against Mali and Zambia.

Hakimi added: "I'm not thinking about me as an individual. If I only play one minute and the team wins, then that's fine."

For Morocco, this tournament is also about showcasing some world-class stadiums as it hosts a first AFCON since 1988.

The Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium, which will also stage the final, is one of four being used in Rabat.

A huge 75,000-seat stadium in Tangier will host a semi-final, while games will also be played in Casablanca, Marrakesh, Agadir and Fez as the country builds towards the 2030 World Cup which it will co-host with Spain and Portugal.

The introduction of FIFA's expanded Club World Cup last June and July forced the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to push back its flagship tournament.

They could not wait until next June because of the World Cup, and they can no longer stage the Cup of Nations in January and February because of the new UEFA Champions League format.

The only solution was to start in December and continue into the New Year, at a time when many European leagues — where so many African stars play — take a break.

Confederation of African Football president Patrice Motsepe on Saturday acknowledged the need to address the scheduling problem as he announced a decision to play the Cup of Nations every four years following a planned edition in 2028.

"We want to make sure that there is more synchronisation," said Motsepe, and that "the football calendar worldwide is more in harmony".

Morocco are aiming to follow the example of Ivory Coast, who won the last AFCON as hosts in 2024.

North African teams have won four of the last five editions held in the region, including Algeria's triumph in Egypt in 2019.

It remains to be seen whether the doubts surrounding Salah's Liverpool future impact Egypt's chances of winning a record-extending eighth title.

Elsewhere Senegal, winners in 2022 and with a squad featuring Sadio Mane and Iliman Ndiaye, are serious contenders.

Runners-up last year, Nigeria will hope to make amends here for missing out on World Cup qualification.

In contrast, Ghana and Cape Verde are both going to the World Cup but neither are present in Morocco.

The opening ceremony will take place in a festive atmosphere, showcasing the rich Moroccan culture. The official kick-off is set for 5:30pm (GMT).

The opening match will see host nation Morocco take on Comoros in Group A, which also features Zambia and Mali.

### **AFCON 2025 match schedule**

Here are the fixtures and kick-off times for the AFCON 2025 group stage (all times GMT):

#### **Group stage**

#### **December 21, 2025 — Morocco vs Comoros (7:00pm GMT)**

#### **December 22, 2025**

Mali vs. Zambia (2:00pm GMT)

Egypt vs. Zimbabwe (8:00pm GMT)

South Africa vs. Angola (5:00pm GMT)

#### **December 23, 2025**

Nigeria vs. Tanzania (5:30pm GMT)

Tunisia vs. Uganda (8:00pm GMT)

Senegal vs. Botswana (3:00pm GMT)

DR Congo vs. Benin (12:30pm GMT)

#### **December 24, 2025**

Algeria vs. Sudan (3:00pm GMT)

Burkina Faso vs. Equatorial Guinea (12:30pm GMT)

Ivory Coast vs. Mozambique (5:30pm GMT)

Cameroon vs. Gabon (8:00pm GMT)

### **December 26, 2025**

Morocco vs. Mali (8:00pm GMT)

Zambia vs. Comoros (5:30pm GMT)

Egypt vs. South Africa (3:00pm GMT)

Angola vs. Zimbabwe (12:30pm GMT)

### **December 27, 2025**

Nigeria vs. Tunisia (8:00pm GMT)

Uganda vs. Tanzania (5:30pm GMT)

DR Congo vs. Senegal (3:00pm GMT)

Benin vs. Botswana (12:30pm GMT)

### **December 28, 2025**

Algeria vs. Burkina Faso (5:30pm GMT)

Equatorial Guinea vs. Sudan (3:00pm GMT)

Cameroon vs. Ivory Coast (8:00pm GMT)

Gabon vs. Mozambique (12:30pm GMT)

### **December 29, 2025**

Morocco vs. Zambia (7:00pm GMT)

Comoros vs. Mali (7:00pm GMT)

Egypt vs. Angola (4:00pm GMT)

Zimbabwe vs. South Africa (4:00pm GMT)

## **December 30, 2025**

Nigeria vs. Uganda (4:00pm GMT)

Tanzania vs. Tunisia (4:00pm GMT)

Botswana vs. DR Congo (7:00pm GMT)

Benin vs. Senegal (7:00pm GMT)

## **December 31, 2025**

Equatorial Guinea vs. Algeria (4:00pm GMT)

Burkina Faso vs. Sudan (4:00pm GMT)

Cameroon vs. Mozambique (7:00pm GMT)

Ivory Coast vs. Gabon (7:00pm GMT)

## **Knockout stage**

Round of 16: January 3–6, 2026

— Quarter-finals: January 9 & 10, 2026

— Semi-finals: January 14, 2026

— Third-place playoff: January 17, 2026

— Final: January 18, 2026 (7:00pm GMT)