



RAINBOW OF COLOURS: Fireworks illuminate the night sky over the Khalifa Stadium in Doha during the opening ceremony of the 15th Asian Games on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Spectacularly it starts

AFP, Doha



Arabian horses, giant caravans and Qatari children headlined a spectacularly successful ceremony to open the Asian Games on Friday that celebrated Asia's rich cultures and offered a message of peace.

Heavy rain stopped just minutes before the start, allowing Qatar to execute a colourful three-hour extravaganza in front of 55,000 spectators packed into Khalifa Stadium and a worldwide television audience of three billion.

The stadium was transformed into a giant "sea" as one man set sail from Qatar peninsula protected by his falcon and guided by a powerful light to discover Asia.

For the next hour, an enthralled capacity crowd witnessed Asia's varying cultures that included dancers from Kazakhstan, India, Thailand, Indonesia's Bali as well as Chinese opera singers and Japanese geisha.

An enormous gold and red cloth representing the Silk Road stretched through the stadium followed by six giant ornate caravans, representing the regions of Asia, and their colourful, dancing troupes.

Celebrating the skills of the desert region's horsemen, 64 riders in white tribal dress and carrying penants performed a detailed routine on Arabian horseback, to roars of approval from the crowd.

Qatari emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani opened the 15th and largest ever Games with thousands of athletes from 45 countries to compete in 39 sports.

"The United Nations has emphasised the importance of sport in achieving peace..." his son, Crown Prince Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, told the crowd, saying this was an important aim of the Games.

International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya were among those attending.

As they looked on, Bollywood singer Sunidhi Chauhan sang of harmony and unity, before 1,900 Qatari school children ran into the stadium carrying illuminated doves to form the words peace in Arabic and English.

The field was again transformed, this time into a giant "Arabian majlis" or reception room with enormous cushions and Arabian

coffee pots, to welcome the athletes as Cantopop king Jacky Cheung sang Together Now.

Huge cheers greeted into the arena the Iraqi team who are entering these Games for the first time in 20 years despite endless carnage and uncertainty in their war-ravaged country.

The Palestinian territories and Lebanon were also warmly received along with athletes from Afghanistan, suffering their worst 12 months of bloodshed since the fall of the fundamentalist Taliban.

However, the biggest reception was reserved for hosts Qatar who marched in to a standing ovation.

In a symbolic gesture, athletes from South and North Korea entered together under a neutral banner showing a simple picture of their peninsula. Chances of a joint

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China fire early

AFP, Doha

China took charge on the opening day of the Asian Games Saturday, winning the first three golds on offer in an ominous signal of its intentions as the sporting extravaganza finally got underway.

The other 44 countries competing here look set to play second fiddle to the Chinese juggernaut, although Japan took an early edge in the swimming pool.

Maki Mita set the trend in the women's 200m freestyle with the fastest qualifying time of 2:00.44 ahead of Pan Jiaying of China, the Olympic relay silver medalist.

China's defending champion Yang Yu held off Lee Ji-Eun of South Korea in her heat to win in 2:02.75sec and tipped herself to retain her title.

"In tonight's final I will try to better my time from the morning," she said. "My biggest rival is myself."

Yang collected three gold medals in the Asian Games four years ago and qualified with the third fastest time of 2:02.75, ahead of Japan's Norie Urae, who claimed a place in the final on her 20th birthday.

In the women's 100m butterfly, Zhou Yafei of China won her head-to-head in the heats with Japan's Ayako Doi and both go forward to the evening's final, along with Yuko Nakanishi, the Olympic bronze medalist over 200m.

But it was on the shooting ranges that China really took a grip, winning the first three medals of the Games.

The Chinese men won the 10m Air Rifle team event and the women added the Trap team and individual gold medals to give their rivals a taste of their expected domination on the wind-swept ranges over the next six days.

World number one Li Chen

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Spurs gunned down

INTERNET, undated



Arsenal responded to recent criticism with a resounding, if somewhat controversial, 3-0 win over bitter rivals Tottenham in the first North London derby staged at Emirates Stadium.

Missing injured captain Thierry Henry, and off the back of a two-game losing streak which had effectively ruled them out of the title race, Arsene Wenger's Gunners produced a fine display to counter the implication that they are a spent force this season.

However Martin Jol may have felt somewhat aggrieved at the nature of Spurs' defeat, despite the poor performance from his side, with Emmanuel Adebayor's first half opener coming after a close offside call.

The former Monaco man is making a habit of scoring against Arsenal's biggest rivals, and although his input is not always universally admired, the Togo international enhanced his reputation by adding to his goal against Manchester United with a well taken finish.

Stand-in captain Gilberto was the unlikely scorer of the following two goals, both from the penalty spot, but controversy surrounded both awards as Spurs' winless away streak in the North London derby extended to 13 years.

Looking like a team with a point to prove, Arsenal impressed in the opening exchanges and quickly settled into their trademark passing style.

However it was Tottenham who

fashioned the first clear-cut chance of the tie as Dimitar Berbatov broke free down the left, but after shaking off a tackle from Emmanuel Eboe and cutting the ball back to Steed Malbranque, the French midfielder stabbed his shot just wide.

Jol had highlighted Bulgarian hit-man Berbatov as a potential matchwinner prior to the game, and only a poor offside decision prevented him from proving his predatory abilities as he looked to round off a flowing move.

When Arsenal's goal arrived on 20 minutes it was in somewhat controversial circumstances, as Adebayor was the beneficiary of a mightily close offside call when he was allowed to collect a long ball over the top from Kolo Toure.

However the Togolese striker maintained his composure to take two touches before curling his shot round Paul Robinson, and then charged to the touchline to embrace his sidelined skipper Henry.

An influx of foreign players has been blamed for watering down the intensity of the North London derby in recent seasons, but two of Tottenham's summer recruits were certainly not shirking the challenge with Malbranque in combative mood and Benoit Assou-Ekotto receiving a booking for a messy challenge on Freddie Ljungberg.

However Jol's team were struggling to create anything of note, and Arsenal were also unable to hit the heights with both Adebayor and Ljungberg failing to beat Robinson with good openings.

If Spurs had been unhappy about the nature of the first goal, then they would have been positively fuming at the second as

Graham Poll awarded a penalty despite Pascal Chimbonda appearing to get a touch on the ball when he slid in to tackle Tomas Rosicky on 42 minutes.

With regular spot kick taker Henry relegated to the role of cheerleader, vice-captain Gilberto stepped up and buried his shot past the diving Robinson for a two-goal lead.

Jol reacted to a dismal first 45 minutes by withdrawing Malbranque and the shaky-looking Assou-Ekotto, with Jermaine Jenas and Lee Young-pyo introduced in the French duo's place.

Arsenal were forced into a change of their own when Alexander Hleb came on to replace the injured Rosicky on 55 minutes, and despite an improved display from Spurs the Gunners' backline had little to worry themselves with going into the last half hour.

Jol's introduction of Jenas made a tangible difference at first, and the England international saw a good long range effort mystifyingly parried by Lehmann when a catch looked easy, but Aaron Lennon could not put the rebound away as chances remained few and far between.

Any hopes Spurs had of mounting a comeback were ended on 71 minutes when Arsenal won another spot-kick, and although the trip from Jenas on van Persie was clear, there was also a hint of a handball from the Dutch striker.

After Jenas followed Gilberto and Teemu Tainio into Poll's book, the Brazilian midfielder did not waste the chance to claim a rare brace as he sent Robinson the wrong way from 12 yards.

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Veron facing imprisonment

AFP, Rome

An Italian court has recommended a two-year jail term for former Argentina international Juan Sebastian Veron who is accused of illegally obtaining an Italian passport.

Former Lazio player Veron, and six others including former Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti, have been prosecuted for irregularities in Veron obtaining his passport on September 9 1999.

Cragnotti is also facing a possible two-year jail term following the prosecutors' recommendations. The trial resumes on January 12.

Veron spent seven years playing in Italy with Sampdoria (1996-98),

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Fergie shrugs off Jose

Football

INTERNET, undated

Sir Alex Ferguson is convinced Manchester United can ram Jose Mourinho's taunts back down the Chelsea manager's throat this season.

Mourinho emerged from last weekend's title battle at Old Trafford declaring his side now held all the aces in the race for the Barclays Premiership.

In pointing out United have now played remainder of the big four - Arsenal, Liverpool and Chelsea - on home soil, Mourinho stated he was content the Stamford Bridge outfit had the easier run-in and

their present position three points behind the Red Devils made them favourites to complete a hat-trick of Premiership triumphs.

As a master of psychology himself, Ferguson can spot a mind game coming a long way off. And he simply points to the league table as evidence United's challenge is going to be sustained throughout the entire campaign.

"Jose can make his comments and predictions," Ferguson told MUTV.

"But why should I worry about what he is saying? We have all the answers, we are doing it on the pitch.

"All I know is our form has been terrific and we were a better team than Chelsea last week."

Although Ferguson's squad remains weak compared with the riches Mourinho has at his disposal, the Scot has started to address the problem by announcing the arrival of Henrik Larsson on a short-term loan from January 1.

And, while the Red Devils have seven league games to play - starting with this evening's clash at Middlesbrough - before Larsson is available, Ferguson is confident his team will still be top when the Swede arrives.

"I hear all this nonsense about who is going to be top," he smiled.

"On January 1, we will all know where we stand in terms of winning the league.

"By then, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer

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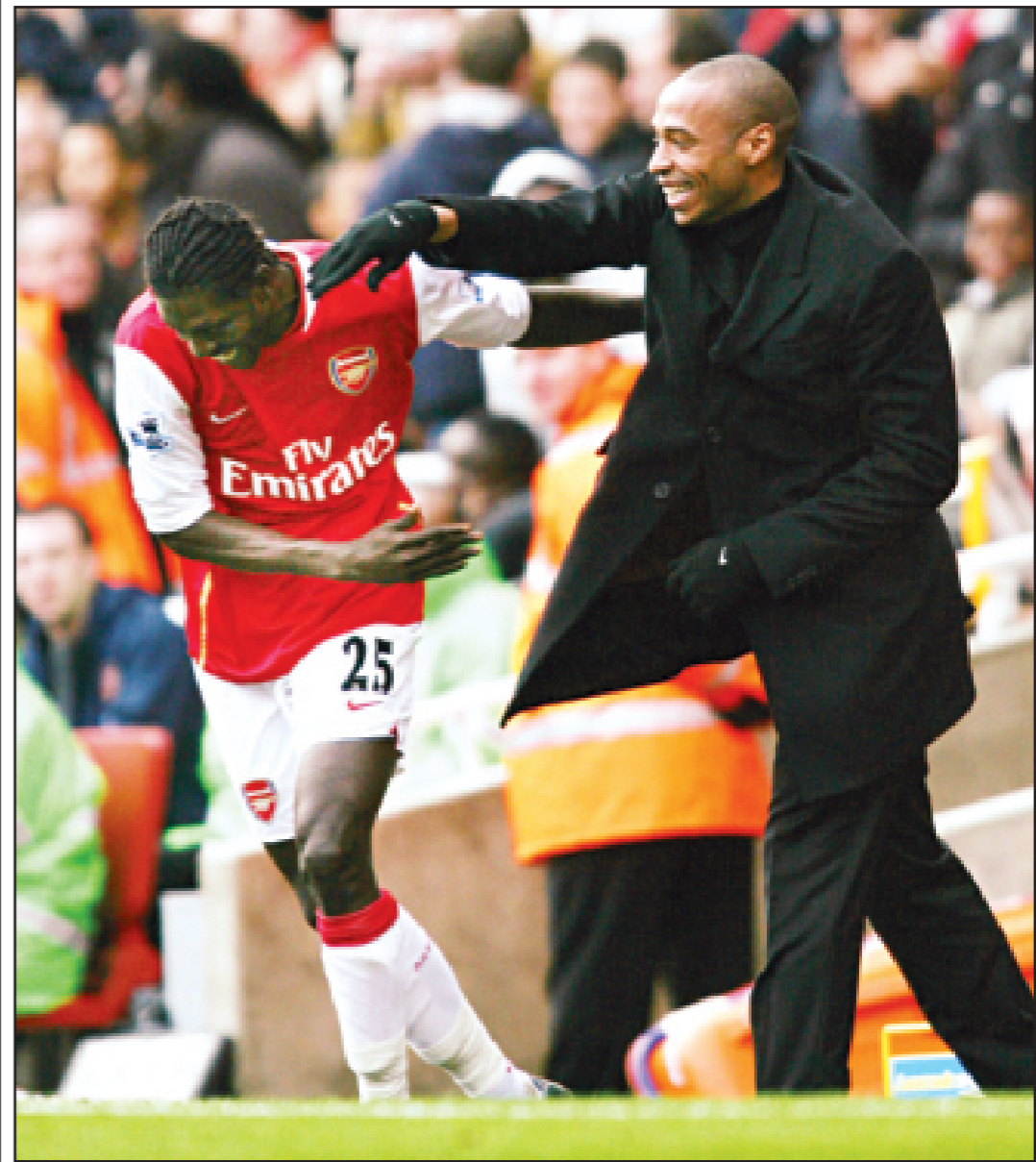


PHOTO: AFP

TAKE YOUR TURN: Injured Arsenal striker Thierry Henry (R) congratulates teammate Emmanuel Adebayor after the latter scored the first goal in their Premiership derby against Tottenham at The Emirates Stadium in London on Saturday.