



Cup comes first for Batistuta

LETRAT, France, June 17 (Reuters): Gabriel Batistuta tried to keep his mind on the World Cup on Tuesday as he was bombarded with question about a reported transfer to Parma.

"I've got no idea (about Parma)... it would be spectacular if I could be the top scorer and win the World Cup with Argentina," Batistuta said, trying to change the subject.

Media in Buenos Aires reported a move to Parma was almost in the bag for Batistuta, who last week reiterated his wish to leave Fiorentina even though he is under contract until 2000.

"I don't want to think about a move now. I've got a month's holiday after the World Cup to think about where I'm going to end up," said Batistuta, who scored in Argentina's 1-0 win over Japan in Group H on Sunday.

"I haven't seen (agent Settimio) Aloisio since I got to France."

Argentina's players agreed they had not played well against Japan, but felt they would improve with each match, starting against Jamaica in Paris on Sunday.

"In the first round you can make mistakes and recover," Batistuta said. "People expected us to win by three or four goals, but we're satisfied."

Argentina fans hoped to see their team crush Japan in the same manner as their 4-0 victory over Greece in their first match of the 1994 finals when Batistuta scored a hat-trick.

"You have to win, not think about how many goals you're going to score," goalkeeper Carlos Roa said.

Captain Diego Simeone said what mattered was to have secured the three points. "The only thing you can't fix is whether you play well or badly, the only thing you can't fix (afterwards) is the result," he said.

He said Argentina needed "a little more explosion in midfield." Argentina's media called for the inclusion against Jamaica of River Plate's Marcelo Gallardo to give the midfield more creativity.

Gallardo said: "Always when the team don't play well, people think those who stayed on the sidelines can be the salvation, but it doesn't work that way."

He said he had no idea what changes Passarella might have in mind but he was training hard to "give the coach a selection headache."

Libero Nestor Sensini said he was recovering after dislocating a finger 18 minutes from the end of the Japan match and would be fit to play on Sunday.

Bulgarians add a touch of youth

EVRY, France, June 17: Bulgaria are set to add a youthful touch to their aging side against Nigeria on Friday in a bid to escape World Cup's "group of death."

Marian Hristov, the Bundesliga midfielder who helped Kaiserslautern to the title last season, was announced after training Tuesday.

He is expected to make his World Cup debut against the African side whose 3-2 win against Spain sent tremors through the Bulgarian camp.

Bulgaria could only draw 0-0 with Paraguay.

Hristov, back from a lingering leg injury, could replace midfielder star Anatoli Nankov, who was sent off for a tackle from behind 10 minutes from the end against Paraguay in the opening Group D tie.

Midfielder Ilian Iliev has recovered from a hamstring twinge and will be fit.

Franky's final hurrah

MONTHEUX, France, June 17: Belgium captain Franky Van der Elst confirmed on Tuesday he would definitely retire from international football after this World Cup, reports AFP.

"I'm really struggling at some of the training sessions and although I still enjoy football at this level I know I've reached the end," said the 37-year-old, who was talked out of retirement by Belgium coach Georges Leekens in 1996 when Belgium were struggling in the World Cup qualifying competition.

Van der Elst, playing in his fourth World Cup finals, said he may play one more season for his club Brugge.

A lesson in Braziliance

NANTES, France, June 17 (AP): The defending World Cup champions had gotten an earful about Morocco's "Brazilian-style" soccer. So Ronaldo and Co went out and showed the disciples how it's done.

With art and cool efficiency, Brazil dispatched the Atlas Lions 3-0 Tuesday night to clinch

everything but score in a 2-1 win over Scotland, broke the ice in the ninth minute for his first World Cup goal and set up Bebeto for the third at the 49th. But that hardly measured the torment he caused the Lions' defense with a variety of dribbles, passes and near-misses.

"We played joyful, sparkling

could Brazil ask for? Defensive consistency? Showtime? They got that, too.

After working all week on coverage, the Brazilian defence stiffened and kept the agile Moroccan strikers out of the danger zone. Goalie Taffarel didn't make a save all night.

play soccer. It might, not qualify, but it has every chance to take second in the group."

Moroccan midfielder Moustafa El Hadji hasn't given up.

"There is still hope," he said. "It will be difficult for Norway to beat Brazil. We are going to concentrate our efforts on Scotland."

Coach Henri Michel admitted Morocco's fate was no longer in its own hands.

"Mathematically, it is still possible, but it won't be our doing. It is something that will be decided after the games."

"We have to be realistic," Michel said. "Brazil was better than us tonight and the score proves it."

The Brazilian party started early at Beaujoire stadium in this northwestern river port. The 40,000 fans were a festival of Brazil's green-and-yellow jerseys, face paint and glitter wigs, daubed with splashes of Moroccan red.

What would be a long evening for the Lions began in the second minute, when Rivaldo sent Leonardo in on a breakaway, but his apparent goal was called back for offside.

Five minutes later, Rivaldo tried to catch goalie Driss Benzekri napping with a long shot from midfield, a goal he had made for FC Barcelona. This one went high.

But in the ninth minute, Rivaldo found Ronaldo streaking up the middle. The two-time FIFA player-of-the-year took a step and drilled a right-footed shot past the diving Benzekri to make it 1-0.

The Lions defence tried every way to shut down Ronaldo, even physically. In the 18th minute, said Chiba came in cleats high, tearing Ronaldo's shorts and leaving an ugly bruise on his left thigh. But Russian referee Nikolai Levnikov let him off with a warning.

Zagallo refused to comment on the incident. "That's FIFA's problem," he said.

Five minutes later it was Brazil's Cesar Sampaio who drew a yellow, his second of the Cup, and misses the game against Norway as a result.

It was injury time when Bebeto found Cafu open on the right wing, and he sent a cross to Rivaldo that struck Benzekri's arm before going in for a 2-0 lead.

"When we relax, the results start coming," said Cafu. "We knew we'd gather momentum once the Cup started, and that's what's happening."

In the second period, Bebeto took over.

In the 47th minute he slipped between two defenders for a testing header that Benzekri picked off in the corner.

Three minutes later, defender Abdellah Saber stepped on the ball and Ronaldo picked it off. He blew in from the left side, stutter-stepped around a defender and fed Bebeto for the tap-in.

After that, it was showtime. Rivaldo opened with a behind-the-back pass, and Cafu samba'd over the ball before a perplexed defender. The highlight was a Rivaldo-to-Ronaldo-to-Bebeto gem that was cleared at the last minute, but the crowd roared its appreciation.

Rivaldo said the game showed that it makes little difference whom Brazil plays. "I think we've grown and can beat anyone," he said.

Doriva, making his World Cup debut, replaced Sampaio in the 68th minute, and four minutes later Edmundo came in for Bebeto.

Morocco then sent in Lahcen Abrami and Gharib Amzine for Saber and Chiba in the 76th minute. Amzine would have Morocco's best chance on a feed from Hadji, but his shot from outside the area went high.

In the final minutes, Denilson replaced Rivaldo and Ali El Khattabi came in for Hadda. Junior Baiano drew a yellow card for a rough tackle.

"He can change the course of a game in a moment, destroy a team in a split-second. He is perhaps the greatest playmaker at this World Cup—I just love to see him play."

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Referee — Nikolai Levnikov, Russia.

Mexicans now more composed

FONTENAILLES, France, June 17: Mexico, seemingly rudderless just a couple of weeks ago, find themselves in an unexpected position as World Cup group leaders, healthy and confident their "cunning" can get it into the second round, reports AP.

Even goalkeeper Jorge Campos has promised to go back to wearing his colorful uniforms, after donning a decidedly bland jersey for Mexico's 3-1 debut win against South Korea.

Mexican team doctor Jose Luis Cantu said Tuesday all the players are healthy and fully recovered from Saturday's come-from-behind win against the Koreans.

"The team is working well together and they're all in good shape," Cantu said.

Only one player required his care after the match. Midfielder Ricardo Pelaez, who started the Mexican comeback with a score in the 50th minute, took a glancing kick on the right cheek when teammate Luis Hernandez tallied the second of his two goals late in the game.

"I had some marks from his cleats on my face, but it's no big deal," Pelaez said. Most of his teammates came out unscathed.

"Some of the other players have only minor injuries that are not even worth mentioning. They're all training at full capacity," Cantu said.

The victory offered a measure of vindication for Mexico, which had come under criticism for its unimpressive results leading up to the World Cup and now hopes to ride the win into the second round.

But first it must play two tough teams, Belgium on Saturday in Bordeaux and Group E favorite Netherlands a week from Thursday, in Saint-Etienne.

Mexico would advance with a win against the Belgians, who held the Dutch to a scoreless tie on Saturday.

"They're very strong but they tend to be predictable," said striker Jesus Arellano. "I think we can beat them with superior ball-handling. I think a dose of Mexican cunning can make the difference."



Mustapha Hadji (R) of Morocco and Brazil skipper Dunga battle for possession at Nantes on June 16. — AFP photo

Dunga-Bebeto wrangle

NANTES, June 17: Brazil captain Dunga dismissed a furious row on the pitch with Bebeto during Tuesday's win over Morocco as nothing more than an ordinary argument between teammates, reports Reuters.

"It was just a discussion between two players, let's talk about the Brazilian victory," he said after the 3-0 win made the world champions the first team to qualify for the second round.

"People have arguments at work and we have them on the pitch. When he scored (Brazil's third goal), I went over to celebrate with him just like all the other players, the Brazil national team is above everything else."

The two appeared to fall out after Morocco won a free kick on the edge of the penalty area midway through the first half, when Brazil were one goal ahead.

Dunga was seen yelling at Bebeto, who shouted back. Dunga then yelled even more after appearing to make a head-butting motion towards Bebeto and the two were then restrained by other Brazilian players.

"I was just telling him to stand in front of the ball, which is his job in those situations," said Dunga.

Bebeto, who later scored

Brazil's final goal to get on the scoresheet for the first time in the competition, slunk out of the Stadium without talking to reporters.

Dunga, who is playing in his third World Cup and was captain in 1994, added that his goading of team mates was "For the good of the team."

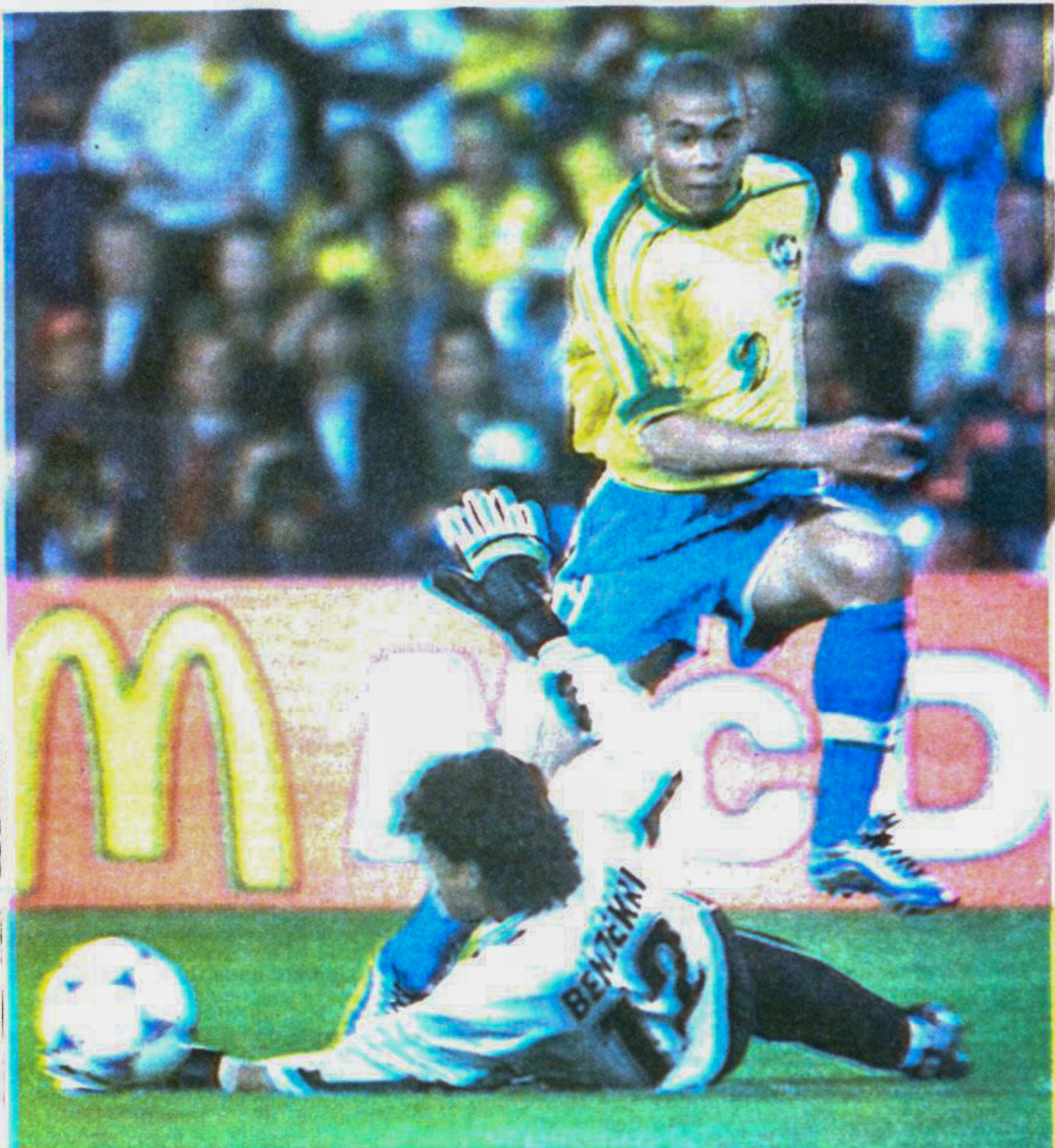
He is known as the team's motivator but also likes to get involved with opponents and on Tuesday was also seen in long conversations with the match referee.

Some feel, however, that Brazil's midfield hard man sometimes goes over the top.

His goading of his teammates near the end of last week's 2-1 win over Scotland led an argument with coach Mario Zagallo, which apparently developed into nothing more serious.

He has also been sent off twice playing for his country, the most recent red card being in a friendly 2-1 win over Germany for two bookable offences last March.

Dunga later apologised and Zagallo said he was not worried about his captain's strong personality. "If he had been sent off for fighting, I would have been worried but it was for two yellow card offences," he said.



Ronaldo (R) watches the ball going past Moroccan custodian Benzekri on June 16. — AFP photo

first place in Group A with six points. Norway, who drew 1-1 with Scotland earlier Tuesday, have two points, while Morocco and Scotland have one.

Ronaldo, who had done ev-

and efficient soccer," said coach Mario Zagallo. "I'm happy with everything — the defence, the midfield and the attack."

Two games, two wins, a berth in the second round. What else

Despite the one-sided outcome, Zagallo had nothing but praise for the Lions.

"We didn't draw just any adversary," he said. "Morocco is a good team that knows how to

France: Cheers or no cheers?

PARIS, June 17: Having uncorked the World Cup champagne with their 3-0 victory over South Africa, France can sweep away any doubts about their championship pedigree against Saudi Arabia on Thursday, reports Reuters.

That opening win eased the pressure on the hosts from fans disappointed by their warm-up form but, predictably, coach Aimé Jacquet is reluctant to let too much confidence show through.

"It's a match where we could easily trip up," he said of the Group C game. "These second matches are going to be like real cup ties because many of the smaller teams lost their opening games, and they are going to want to do better."

A defeat for the Saudis would almost certainly rule them out of the second round.

The teams have never met before but Jacquet will no doubt remind his players of the 1-0 defeat that Saudi Arabia inflicted on a good Belgian side in 1994 which along with a victory over Morocco, took them into the next stage.

Saudi Arabia's coach Carlos Alberto Parreira, who led Brazil to victory in 1994, is aware his side will have to improve markedly after they showed a surprising lack of initiative up front in a 1-0 opening

defeat by the largely unimpressive Danes.

"We have to try to get one point from our first two games so that we can try everything in the last game (against South Africa). But it's very tough," he said. "We create chances, but we are not scoring goals."

France not only overcame a stiff early challenge from the "bafana bafana" but crucially found the spark up front that had eluded them in their warm-up games.

While Jacquet's first-choice striker Stéphane Guivarch'h is still carrying the injury that forced him to go off in that match, his replacement

that kind of form from "desert Maradona" Saed Al-Owairan, remembered for his brilliant solo goal against Belgium but looking less than sharp this time round. "I believe he has something to prove in this game," Carlos Alberto said.

Jacquet is under no illusion that his side will have to make the running again before 80,000 fans in Paris Stade de France.

"I expect the Saudi team to play it very tight, bunched up in their own half but ready to make sudden breaks using the skill of their forwards," he said.

But wing back Bixente Lizarazu, one of the stars of the win against South Africa, was relaxed enough to say: "There are no zero-risk games — but the French defence is our strong point."

Carlos Alberto said the Saudis, likely to field largely the same side that played against Denmark, would have to try to muzzle French midfielder Zinedine Zidane.

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Iranians smell a rat

PARIS, June 17 (Reuters/AFP): Iran's embassy in France denied reports today that its soccer team was considering pulling out of the World Cup because French television aired a controversial film about Iran.

The Iranian embassy formally denied the press reports that the Iranian team will leave the World Cup, an embassy spokesman said.

An Iranian official with the team at its base in Yssingaux, near Lyon, also denied there had been a threat to pull out.

Iran are due to play the United States in a politically charged match on Sunday in Lyon.

Iran has protested to the French foreign ministry and to the private television channel M6 over the broadcast on Monday of the 1991 film "not without my daughter".

The film stars American actress Sally Field and is about an American woman's search in Iran for her daughter after her Iranian husband refused to return the child to the US.

An M6 station official said the Iranian embassy had sent it a note on Friday asking that the film be dropped from its schedule.

"We came here to participate and show our sportsmanship but the players are upset and angry," said team official Ali Manoussifar. "But we will go ahead with the games."

"It (the broadcast) is not going to affect the forthcoming games but it has mentally damaged the players," he said.

"The players were upset and angry. It wasn't fair to show this film during a major sports event. The film was totally untrue and false but the game on Sunday is not in jeopardy."

"The players did not announce that," he said, referring to a press conference on Tuesday where — according to some French media — the players threatened to quit the championships.

M6 earlier denied any ill intent and said the US film had been programme long before.

At a specially arranged press conference Tuesday at their base south of Lyon, Iranian captain Mohammad Khakpour, star striker Khodadad Azizi and teammate Ali-Reza Mansourian denounced M6's decision to broadcast the film.

The film recounts the true story of an American woman who marries an Iranian, moves to Iran and after the marriage breaks down is not allowed to leave the country with her daughter. It is controversial in Iran partly because of the image it gives of ordinary Iranians as dirty and cruel.

But M6 said in a statement late Tuesday that the airing of the 1989 film, already broadcast three times on French television, "had been scheduled a long while back."

"Last Friday, the Iranian embassy contacted us to protest the broadcasting of the film. We did not change our programming but we did broadcast the film along with a statement from the embassy indicating

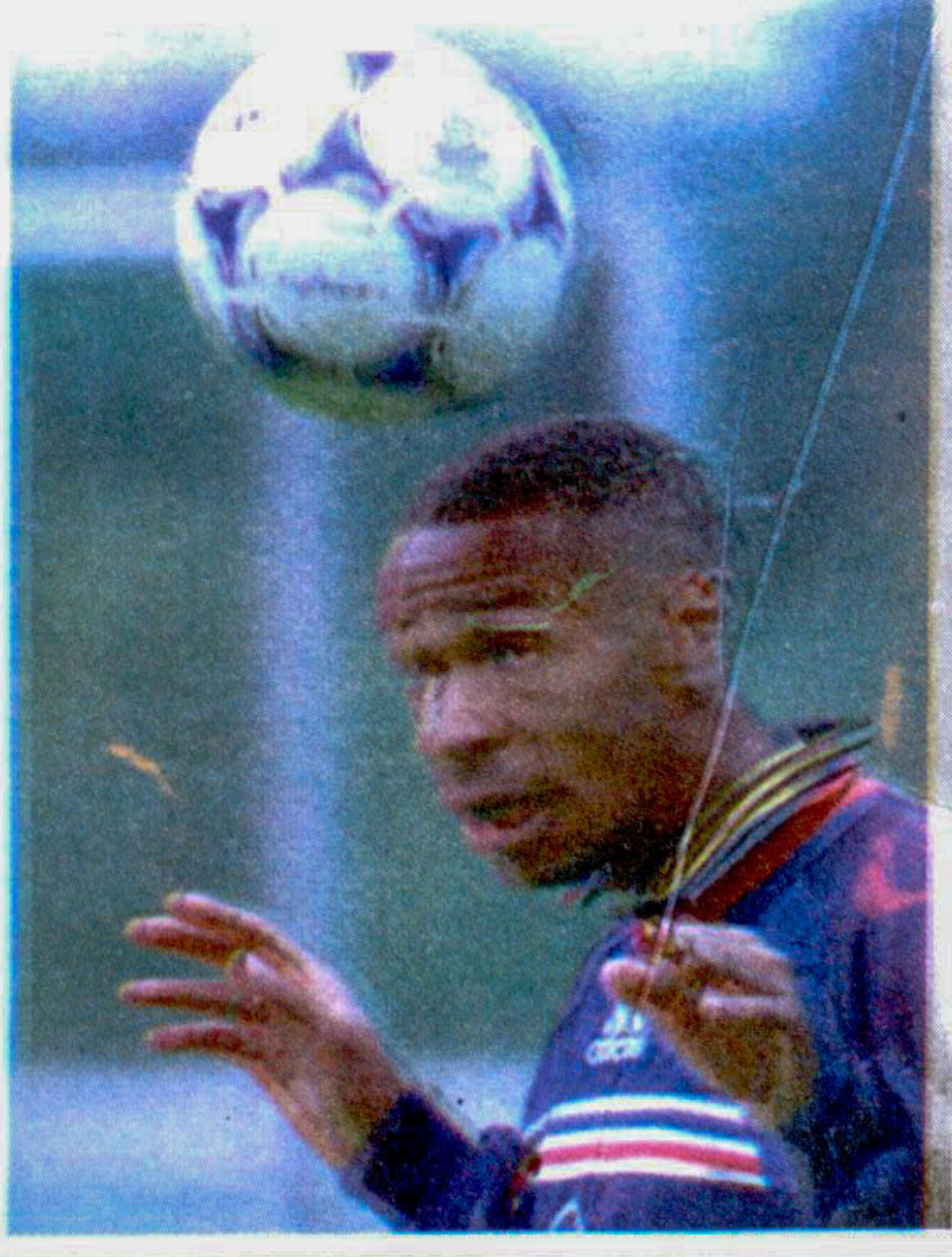
that Iran challenged the truth of the events depicted therein," M6 said in a statement.

Azizi, who said the three players were speaking on behalf of the whole team, denounced the film as "tissue of lies," and an "insult to every Iranian."

All three players insisted that the timing of the film was not accidental.

"Why should this film, that has already been shown many times, appear again now if it was not for a precise reason," said Khakpour.

Asked why the French authorities would have any interest in destabilising the Iranian team to the benefit of the United States, Khakpour replied: "That is exactly the question."



Thierry Henry of France in training at Clairefontaine on June 16. — AFP photo

FRENCH REVOLUTION OR DESERT STORM?

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS

সর্ববিক্রম সত্বস্বীকার। ১ দুবান বাহুরে বালা স্বকিকর