

Heartbreak for Croatia, Poland, Russia

Sigh of relief for Euro elites

PARIS, Oct 9: Europe's finest were not at their best on Saturday but the continent's last three world champions, Italy, Germany and France, all qualified automatically for Euro 2000 in Belgium and Holland next season, reports AFP.

France beat Iceland 3-2 after letting slip a 2-0 lead. Turkey, though, enough to win Group Three, and Italy's 0-0 draw in Belarus was also just sufficient to top group one.

The biggest losers were World Cup semi-finalists Croatia and Russia, Poland and Switzerland who were all eliminated.

Meanwhile England were allowed a back door entry into the play-offs in Group Five when Sweden beat Poland 2-0 in Stockholm.

Republic of Ireland sneaked into second spot in Group Eight too when Croatia could only draw 2-2 at home to arch rivals Yugoslavia.

In Group One, Italy's draw at Belarus enabled them to get into the finals where they will hope to do better than in 1996 in England when they failed to get through the group stages.

The 1992 champions Denmark, who were not in action, took the second play-off spot and are still on course for the showpiece finals.

Switzerland won 2-0 in Wales but it was too late to book their ticket.

In Group Two, everything was already decided with the group winners being Norway, who won 2-1 in Latvia, and surprise package Slovenia, who went through in second spot despite losing 3-0 to Greece.

Germany held off Turkey, who face qualification through the back door as group runners-up.

The Germans found themselves in the unusual position of being strangers in their own stadium with at least half the sold-out Munich crowd being vocal Turks.

The visitors were aggressive and intent on repeating their surprise 1-0 victory from the first leg match but they paid heavily for not taking advantage of the early clutch of shots on goal.

Having dominated the opening 45 minutes, Turkey's pressure wound down after the break and Germany crept back into the game.

Only an 85th-minute shot by lone-standing Erdem Arif, deflected inches wide by Bayern Munich defender Thomas Linke, had the hosts momentarily in trouble.

Third-placed Finland beat fourth-placed Northern Ireland 4-1 in Helsinki in the other group game.

Group Four was the pool which featured the most drama.

French supersub David Trezeguet scored a 71st minute goal to give France victory over Iceland that, together with Russia's bizarre 1-1 draw with Ukraine, ensured the world champions qualify automatically.

France had appeared to be controlling the match after taking a 2-0 interval lead with an own goal from Rikhardur Dadason and a solo strike by Youri Djorkaeff but Iceland, helped by a dreadful error from France's World Cup winning striker Didier Deschamps, had fought back to make the score 2-2 with goals from captain Eystofur Sverrisson and Brynjar Gunnarsson.

However, Trezeguet's goal, after a mistake from Iceland keeper Birkir Kristinsson, ensured the world champions qualified with Ukraine now

Velappan has no plans of leaving

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10: Asian Football Confederation (AFC) supremo Peter Velappan Sunday dispelled speculation he will end his 21-year tenure as AFC's general secretary, reports AFP.

Velappan, who is also FIFA's 2002 World Cup coordinating director, said he would oversee the overhaul of the AFC secretariat by appointing an assistant general secretary and increase the number of staff.

When asked what his position was in reference to the statement by AFC President Sultan Ahmad Shah that he wanted a full-time general secretary, the AFC supremo said: "I will help show the assistant secretary the ropes until 2002."

Newspapers Sunday reported Sultan Ahmad Shah was stepping down as the FA of Malaysia president after 15 years at the helm of the football organisation to focus his attention on the AFC.

The sultan told the Sunday Mail newspaper: "I have nothing personal against Velappan but I want a secretary to be with me all the time."

Velappan said the new assistant general secretary would have to be a person "with experience and management skill."

The change to the AFC secretariat was needed to meet the growing international profile of football as a result of the 2002 World Cup coming to Japan and South Korea, he told reporters after the AFC executive committee meeting.

Velappan also said since the AFC would move to its own building in the suburbs of the Malaysian capital in April next year it would increase its staff by 100 percent from 16 at the moment.

In keeping with the AFC's profile, a major sports medicine seminar would be held here in May 24-27, 2000, he said.



Germany's Lothar Matthaeus tries to control the ball ahead of a Turkish player. — AFP photo

STANDINGS

Tables following Euro 2000 qualifiers on Saturday.

Group winners automatically qualify
Portugal qualifies as best runner-up
Other runners-up compete in play-offs (Played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

GROUP ONE

Italy	8	4	3	1	13	5	15
Denmark	8	4	2	2	11	8	14
Switzerland	8	4	2	2	9	5	14
Wales	8	3	0	5	7	16	9
Belarus	8	0	3	5	4	10	9

GROUP TWO

Norway	10	8	1	1	21	9	25
Slovenia	10	5	2	3	12	14	17
Greece	10	4	3	3	13	8	15
Latvia	10	3	4	3	13	12	13
Albania	10	1	4	5	8	14	7
Georgia	10	1	2	7	8	18	5

GROUP THREE

Germany	8	6	1	1	20	4	19
Turkey	8	5	2	1	15	6	17
Finland	8	3	1	4	13	13	10
Northern Ireland	8	1	2	5	4	19	5
Moldova	8	0	4	4	7	17	4

GROUP FOUR

France	10	6	3	1	17	10	21
Ukraine	8	5	5	0	14	4	20
Russia	10	6	1	3	22	12	19
Iceland	10	4	3	3	12	7	15
Armenia	10	2	2	6	8	15	8
Andorra	10	0	0	10	3	28	0

GROUP FIVE

Sweden	8	7	1	0	10	1	22
England	8	3	4	1	14	4	13
Poland	8	4	1	3	12	8	13
Bulgaria	7	1	2	4	3	8	5
Luxembourg	7	0	0	7	2	20	0

GROUP SIX

Spain	7	6	0	1	39	5	18
Israel	7	4	1	2	25	6	13
Cyprus	7	4	0	3	11	18	12
Austria	7	3	1	3	16	19	10
San Marino	8	0	0	8	1	44	0

GROUP SEVEN

Romania	10	7	3	0	25	3	24
Portugal	10	7	2	1	32	4	23
Slovakia	10	5	2	3	12	9	17
Hungary	10	3	3	4	14	10	12
Azerbaijan	10	1	1	8	6	26	4
Liechtenstein	10	1	1	8	2	39	4

GROUP EIGHT

Yugoslavia	8	5	2	1	18	8	17
Ireland	8	5	1	2	14	6	16
Croatia	8	4	3	1	13	9	15
Macedonia	8	2	2	4	13	14	8
Malta	8	0	0	8	6	27	0

GROUP NINE

Czech Republic	10	10	0	0	26	5	30
Scotland	10	5	3	2	15	10	18</td