

Ecuador, Paraguay in finals

Brazil delayed by Bolivia



AFP, Montevideo

Ecuador and Paraguay became the latest South American sides to book their tickets to next year's World Cup party on Tuesday - but troubled four-time winners Brazil are still waiting for their invitation after crashing to yet another miserable defeat.

Ecuador, bidding to qualify for their first ever World Cup, needed only a point against Uruguay in Quito to guarantee themselves a top-four finish in the 10-team group, and they didn't disappoint their expectant fans.

Despite falling behind to a controversial early penalty from Uruguay's Nicolas Olivera, Ecuador held their nerve and came back to level with a goal from Celta Vigo-bound striker Ivan Kaviedes in the second-half.

Ecuador's result spelt good news for Paraguay, who qualified on Wednesday without having to kick a ball. The Paraguayans play Venezuela later Thursday but cannot now be dislodged from the top four.

Who will join Argentina, Ecuador and Paraguay remains uncertain. Brazil are currently fourth and remain favourites - but a 3-1 humiliation against Bolivia in La Paz was the last thing the four-time tournament winners needed.

In a match played 3,600 metres above sea level, Brazil were left gasping by some breathless attacking football from Bolivia, a team with nothing to play for save pride.

Brazil, who could have secured their ticket to Japan and South Korea with a victory, appeared to have put one foot in the finals when striker Edison fired them into a 25th-minute lead against the run of play.

But an equaliser from Lider Paz followed by two second-half goals from Julio Baldvieso wrapped up a memorable win for the home team, who finished the game in rampant fashion, shredding Brazil's defence at will.

A shellshocked Brazil coach Felipe Scolari admitted his team had been overwhelmed.

"They were much better than us," said Scolari as he picked over the wreckage of what was only Brazil's second defeat to Bolivia. "They mixed commitment with good technical quality and they just worked much harder than us,"



PHOTO: AFP
Brazil's Denilson (L) and Rivaldo stand dejected at the end of their World Cup qualifier against Bolivia at La Paz on November 7.

he added.

"It doesn't help that I have only a few hours training with the squad before the match for preparation," he added.

However although the defeat will deal another blow to Brazil's already fractured morale, Scolari's

team will still be favourites to take the fourth and final automatic qualifying spot from South America.

That place will go to them if they beat Venezuela at home in their final fixture next week. Against a side they beat 6-0 in the away

fixture earlier in qualifying, the Brazilians will be favourites although after this latest setback, their fans may not be in the mood to take anything for granted.

Scolari remains confident of leading Brazil to the finals. "We play Venezuela next week and if we win we qualify. We have the players to do it," he said.

At the other end of the table, Colombia had a virtuoso display from maverick attacker Faustino Asprilla to thank in a 3-1 win over Chile that keeps their faint hopes of qualification alive.

But the match in Bogota ended in uproar with Chile reduced to seven men.

The Colombians, who must now beat Paraguay away in their final game next week and hope that Argentina draw or beat Uruguay to take fifth place - and a play-off against Australia - fought back from going a goal down to run out winners.

The result was overshadowed by persistent cynicism and skulduggery, with Chile's Victor Cancino, Moises Villarroel, Patricio Ormazabal and Marco Villaseca all getting their marching orders.

Chile coach Jorge Garces rushed to the defence of his players however, launching a scathing attack on Argentine referee Daniel Gimenez.

"I have so many feelings at the moment. I think I there were two games out there today, either side of the second goal, their equaliser.

"I can't excuse how my players reacted by I can say that there was somebody out there provoking them and he punished us for it," Garces said in a veiled attack at Argentine referee Daniel Gimenez.

Garces admitted the sendings off had left his team with a hopeless task. "You can't play when you have so many players off the field," he said.

"Everybody saw Gimenez' decisions out there. I don't know how he is allowed to referee a match like that," Garces.

Chile, bottom of South America's qualifying table and with no hope of reaching Japan and South Korea, had taken a shock lead through a 38th-minute Jaime Riveros free-kick.

But second-half goals from Freddy Grisales, Aston Villa striker Juan-Pablo Angel and Jerisson Gonzalez saw the home team triumph as Chile hit the self-destruct button.

Spanish Kings Cup

Barca sent packing

AFP, Madrid

Spanish giants Barcelona were sensationally knocked out of the Spanish Cup at the first hurdle when Third Division outfit Figueras scored in extra time Wednesday.

All other Spanish First Division clubs involved in Cup action managed to scrape through their respective matches as Barcelona were dealt their second blow in four days after Sunday's defeat to bitter rivals Real Madrid.

Figueras, who currently lie eighth in their league, proved up to the task of containing a second-string Barcelona side - albeit complete with a string of international stars including Sweden's Patrick Andersson, Dutchman Marc Overmars and Argentine forward Saviola.

Extra time was called for after both teams had failed to make the difference, and almost immediately the hosts - supported by almost 10,000 supporters in a packed stadium - were celebrating after Kali Garrido scored the only goal of the game.

Osasuna, Alaves and Deportivo La Coruna all qualified for the next round but met plenty of resistance from teams determined to make their mark on the competition.

Osasuna and Alaves both left it late, scoring goals in the 89th and 90th minutes respectively over Gramamet and Compostela while league leaders Deportivo had been led before they put four goals past nine-man Marino.

Barcelona's elimination means they are the eighth top flight club to drop out of the competition known as the "King's Cup" after Seville, Espanyol, Real Sociedad, Zaragoza, Real Betis, Tenerife and Valencia.

Kirin Challenge Cup friendly

Italy held by Japan



AFP, Saitama, Japan

Japan's World Cup preparations received another boost here on Wednesday when they forced Italy to come from behind to claim a 1-1 draw in the Kirin Challenge Cup friendly.

Second-half substitute



PHOTO: AFP
Japan forward Atsushi Yanagisawa (R) celebrates his strike against Italy with Yasuhiro Hato during their Kirin Cup friendly at the Saitama Stadium in Saitama on November 7.

Cristiano Doni equalised shortly into the second half after Atsushi Yanagisawa had given the World Cup 2002 joint hosts a shock ninth minute lead in the first meeting of the two countries.

Arsenal midfielder Junichi Inamoto created the opener with a cross from the left which Yanagisawa met with a looping shot over goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

The Italians, who only arrived here on Tuesday, looked sluggish

at the start and Inamoto, midfielder Shinji Ono, who plays for Dutch side Feyenoord, and Hiroaki Morishima all spurned chances for Japan in the opening period.

But the visitors gradually moved into top gear and Doni put them on level terms with a comfortable finish from Mark Lukiano's pass in the 51st minute.

Japan fielded star Italian-based midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata for the second half but they were unable to break down a tight Italian defence.

"I put pressure on my players because we have only six months before the World Cup and this is a match that we must show our strength if we are strong enough to play the World Cup," said Japan's head coach Philippe Troussier.

"And I'm very much satisfied with the quality of our play. Although it was a friendly match, I felt like it was a World Cup match. Italy are a great team, they are top four in the world, and we were able to draw with them.

"We missed three players today, but I've already chosen most of the players for the finals. This is our last game this year. We are going to keep the level of our game and we'll accelerate in around March for the finals," he added.

Italy's coach Giovanni Trapattoni said he was "disappointed" by the result.

"We were rather off-balanced in the first half as we arrived here yesterday after playing a game and Japan played aggressively and quickly in a very good rhythm.

"But as the game went on, we started to play in our own rhythm. If we had been in our usual form, we could have scored a few more goals.

"But overall I'm satisfied with the result, especially that we regained our rhythm in the second half," he added.

STANDINGS

Table, results and remaining fixtures in the South American qualifying group for the 2002 World Cup following Wednesday's matches:

* The teams finishing in positions 1 to 4 win automatic qualification. The fifth placed side goes into a home and away play-off against Oceania winners Australia. The winner of that match also qualifies for the finals. (Played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points)

Argentina	16	12	3	1	39	14	39
Paraguay	16	9	3	4	28	16	30
Ecuador	17	9	3	5	23	20	30
Brazil	17	8	3	6	28	17	27
Uruguay	17	7	5	5	18	12	26
Colombia	17	6	6	5	16	15	24
Bolivia	17	4	5	8	20	32	17
Peru	16	4	3	9	13	22	15
Venezuela	16	4	1	11	15	40	13
Chile	17	3	2	12	15	27	11

FIFA extremely impressed



AFP, Tokyo

Football's world governing body FIFA declared Japan ready to start hosting the World Cup from "tomorrow" as it completed an inspection of stadiums here for next year's finals to be co-hosted with South Korea.

The FIFA inspection team, which arrived here Sunday led by vice president Antonio Matarrese, visited four stadiums in Sapporo, Oita, Kobe and Saitama which were completed earlier this year.

"It's my impression to inform you that the World Cup can begin in Japan tomorrow. The 10 stadiums were dreams three or four years ago. Today you have 10 of the most magnificent stadiums in the world," Matarrese told reporters Thursday.

"These stadiums are really a dream come true for players, spec-

tators and media. FIFA is very proud of your achievement. The state of preparation is very advanced and very professional.

"This completed the inspection of all of the stadiums in Japan for the 2002 World Cup," he added.

The delegation watched Japan hold powerhouse Italy to 1-1 draw in a friendly match at the Saitama Stadium in a western Tokyo suburb Wednesday.

The delegation, which also includes FIFA directors Abdullah Al-Dabal and Walter Gagg, and 2002 finals coordination director Peter Velappan, was to leave for South Korea later Thursday.

Velappan meanwhile defended the unprecedented decision to allow the two often prickly Asian neighbours to co-host the finals.

Japan occupied the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 and there is still deeply rooted anger in South Korea towards its former colonial power.

"Every time we visit Korea and

Japan, we feel that this has been the best decision, not only for Korea and Japan, but also for football in the world," said Velappan.

"When we finish this World Cup, we will leave behind a permanent bridge where the young generation will be able to cross between the two countries and build up an enormous solidarity of Korea, Japan and this region."

As for the security measures in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, the FIFA team said they were satisfied with what has been done and will be done by the two countries.

"FIFA is totally satisfied with everything done so far by the JAWOC (Japanese organizing committee)," said Matarrese, adding there were no countries safer than Japan and South Korea.

"We can assure you and the rest of the world that Korea and Japan will produce a spectacular World Cup and FIFA and football will be very proud."

Effenberg back in training

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich captain Stefan Effenberg has returned to training after a three month injury lay-off, the club said here on Wednesday.

The 33-year-old had been sidelined since limping out of the opening match of the season on July 28 at Borussia Monchengladbach with a swollen foot, but is due to play in the November 17 league match against Werder Bremen.

Effenberg won acclaim in Bayern Munich's Champion's League winning season last year because of his visionary playmaking, but will leave Bayern in June next year to make way for 21-year-old Hertha Berlin midfielder Sebastian Deisler.

Blazevic's respect for Ireland



AFP, Tehran

Iran coach Miroslav Blazevic said Ireland was one of the world's strongest sides ahead of the World Cup 2002 qualification play-off first-leg tie between the two countries in Dublin on Saturday.

"We have seen Ireland's matches several times and, unhappily, we have noticed a total lack of weakness anywhere in the side," Blazevic told AFP a few minutes before the Iran squad boarded a flight for Dublin.

Blazevic, who coached his native Croatia to the semi-finals at the 1998 World Cup in France, predicted a tough, physical encounter as the two countries compete for a place at the finals in Japan and South Korea next summer.

"Ireland are one of the best teams in the world and we'll need to be in peak physical condition to qualify. We are ready for the challenge and we'll do everything possible to achieve our aim," said Blazevic.

"Anything can happen in a match like this and I'm making no predictions. But if we lost 4-2 for example, we would still be in with a chance," he added.

After several under-par perfor-

mances in the second round of Asian qualifiers, which allowed Saudi Arabia to take the automatic qualifying place, Iran were forced into a play-off against the United Arab Emirates.

A sparkling performance in the 3-0 second-leg win in Abu Dhabi earned Iran the home-and-away clash with Ireland.

Blazevic predicted that Ireland and Manchester United captain Roy Keane would shake off his knee injury and play in the first-leg.

"He is a great moral force for the Irish side," he explained.

Iranian football federation president Mohsen Safai-Farahani was taking the most sporting of attitudes ahead of the clash.

"Above all, I'm hoping the side plays well, the result is secondary," he said.

Meanwhile, Hertha Berlin striker Ali Daei felt the match was the most difficult Iran had faced since the 1998 World Cup but insisted he and his teammates would be playing to win at Lansdowne Road.

"It's in Dublin where we really need to win," he said.

The second leg of the play-off takes place in Tehran on November 15 where a crowd of 110,000 will turn out - including a group of women Irish spectators, the first time women fans have been allowed to watch a match alongside men since the Islamic revolution in 1979.

Oxford United turns to divine aid

AFP, Oxford

A struggling English football club turned to religion for inspiration after a string of defeats, calling in a senior Church of England bishop to rid their ground of a supposed curse.

The Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend Richard Harries, duly blessed the pitch and intoned a prayer for protection against evil, his spokesman told AFP Wednesday.

Oxford United, struggling near the bottom of England's Third Division, has won only four of its 17 games so far this season.

"It was not an exorcism," insisted the spokesman, Reverend Richard Thomas.

"We were well aware of the talk among some players of a sense of evil, they interpreted it as a curse.

"As Christians it was sensible to allay that talk once and for all."

The string of defeats fuelled earlier suspicions that the ground might have been cursed by gypsies who had been evicted from the site for the building of the club's new stadium, which it moved into at the start of the season.

"We were aware of the concerns of some people of a curse on the ground even before it was built," Thomassaid.

"It was a blessing of the pitch with prayers for protection against evil," he added.

The ceremony, during which the bishop, dressed in full garb, sprinkled holy water on the centre circle of the pitch, came after a request from the club's chairman and chaplain.

Passarella new Parma coach



REUTERS, Parma

Parma's new coach Daniel Passarella believes the struggling Italian club can still finish in the top four of Serie A this season.

The former Argentina captain, who was named Parma's new coach on Tuesday after Carlo Ancelotti rejected the job, faces a tough task improving the fortunes of the team which currently lies

11th in the table.

"It is true that I consider this team capable of finishing in the top four," Passarella told a news conference on Wednesday.

"In this line of work, whether you are a player or a coach, you always need to aim high.

"We have a very competitive squad and I hope that my staff, both Italians and Argentines, will be able to quickly insert the right spirit."

"What this team lacks is real belief in their own abilities and their quality."

FIFA also warned the FFF that any further incidents of a similar nature within the next two years would lead to a heavier fine and possibly a ban on using the stadium ban too.

Seventeen people were arrested during the politically sensitive match after fans began to throw bottles, seating and pieces of wood from the stands as riot police surrounded the turf.

The French headed straight to a night training session after arriving on a plane fitted out at a reported cost of 750,000 US dollars with a massage area, lounge and special lay-back seats.

The arrangement may be a result of their fight with FIFA and powerful European and British clubs after both countries insisted that all of their top players make the trip down under.

Lemerre said he and his Australian counterpart Frank Farina had agreed each team would be allowed up to six substitu-

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The October 6 international at Stade de France in Paris was the first game between the two countries since Algeria's independence from French rule in 1962 and was abandoned after thousands of youths invaded the pitch with 15 minutes

The players, who were not threatened by the fans, were ordered to the locker rooms. Minutes after the interruption, it was decided to call the match off though the scenes appeared exuberant rather than violent.