



REALITY BITES: (L) A crestfallen Argentina superstar Gabriel Batistuta leaves the World Cup stage for the last time while (R) shell-shocked fans try to come to grips with their national team's exit at Miyagi yesterday.

## ITALY VS MEXICO

# Date with destiny

AP, Oita

The water level is rising around the throats of the Italians, and they have one chance to save themselves: a contest against Mexico on Thursday that the three-time champions must win to be sure of a place in the next round.

The Italians have been near drowning before in the World Cup, and have a habit of dragging themselves ashore at the last minute.

"We Italians are used to being up against it," playmaker Francesco Totti said. "When the water is up to our necks, that's when we pull out our best."

Italy have not gone out of the World Cup in the first round since 1974, and they do not plan to repeat that humiliation this time.

In 1994, they came near first-round expulsion, also playing in their final group match against Mexico. Italy won that game 1-1, but managed to sneak through to the next round anyway, eventually making the final.

This may still be the group phase, but the Italians are equating Thursday's clash with Mexico to an early final.

"This is a time that we should be calm and united," said midfielder Angelo Di Livio. "We can consider

this match like a final -- the expectations are like that."

Italy will make the second round if they beat Mexico or if they earn a draw with Mexico while Croatia either lose to Ecuador or draw and have a lower goal difference. If Italy and Croatia both lose, it will come down to goal difference between these two and Ecuador.

In short, Italy had better win if they don't want to put their World Cup future in the hands of other teams.

"If we fail, we're out," wide midfielder Gianluca Zambrotta said. "But we are alert, and very motivated to play Mexico."

Midfielder Luigi Di Biagio has been ruled out of the Mexico match with a calf injury and could miss the rest of the tournament. Defender Alessandro Nesta, who injured his foot in the Croatia match, is questionable. And two other defenders and a midfielder skipped Tuesday's practice with aches.

That could leave the Italians -- who brought many attackers to Japan but fewer midfielders and defenders than some thought wise -- dangerously thin in those two areas.

Coach Giovanni Trapattoni may

well go with three strikers: striker Christian Vieri, who has scored all three of Italy's goals so far, Filippo Inzaghi, and hanging behind them, Totti.

Mexico coach Javier Aguirre said Monday that he expects Trapattoni to play with an attacking lineup. Aguirre also marvelled at the fact that his squad had the best record in the group, with two wins out of two, but still wasn't sure of a spot in the next round.

"Strangely enough, we still have nothing," he said. "The truth is that we are fighting for our qualification against Italy."

Mexico will go through if they win or draw. But if they lose, then they could be knocked out if Croatia beat Ecuador -- as they are expected to do -- and end up with a better goal differential.

"Mexico will be playing just like us," Zambrotta said. "We both want to win as much as each other."

The last time Mexico failed to make it past the first phase of a

SEE PAGE 14 COL 6

# In depths of despair

REUTERS/AFP, undated

Pre-tournament favourites Argentina have departed the World Cup depressed but convinced they deserved more and had done all they could to reach the second round.

"That's a cycle of four years over for the national team, we were unlucky," veteran striker Gabriel Batistuta said after Argentina's 1-1 draw with Sweden on Wednesday left them in third place in the so-called Group of Death and out of the tournament.

"We had 25 chances and they put

one in from a free kick," added Batistuta, who confirmed it was his last match for Argentina in his third World Cup.

Coach Marcelo Bielsa's face showed no emotion.

"I feel a great sadness and disappointment," he said. "To be favourites is a presumption prior to playing. Afterwards you have to confirm that in practice and we didn't."

Batistuta has scored 56 goals in 78 internationals and 10 in World Cup finals.

"I would have liked to have played alongside Crespo but that's a decision for the coach," he said on a

subject that had obsessed the team's followers in the build-up to their first match, a 1-0 win over Nigeria 10 days ago.

Crespo, who was in tears during post-match interviews, came on for Batistuta in all three of Argentina's matches.

Until this year, Argentina reached the second round at least in every World Cup tournament they played in since 1962 in Chile.

The team backed Bielsa to the hilt, with senior players like Batistuta and Juan Sebastian Veron, both captains at different stages in the group games, saying they had full

faith in him.

"I never got depressed at being left out," Veron, tipped as a player of the tournament before it started, said of his exclusion from the starting lineup on Wednesday.

"It's the Argentina shirt. I'm at the team's service. We trust in the coach," he added.

Veron was substituted in Argentina's 1-0 defeat by England on Friday and only came on for the

SEE PAGE 14 COL 2

# Roots forgotten!

REUTERS, Yokohama

The influx of overseas players into Europe's domestic leagues over the past four years means this World Cup is more European in style than any other with even Argentina adopting tactics familiar on the continent.

Pre-tournament favourites Argentina went out at the hands of Sweden after trying to play a European-style game of getting to the byline and crossing into the area, an approach that played into the hands of the physically strong Swedish defence.

The flair of players like Diego Maradona, Osvaldo Ardiles and Mario Kempes was nowhere to be seen as under-performers like Juan Sebastian Veron and Gabriel Batistuta -- who ply their trade in the English and Italian leagues -- failed to ignite the team.

At previous finals Latin flair, African speed and surprise qualifiers -- from North Korea in 1966 to Cameroon in 1990 -- have lit up the tournament as the traditional powers have struggled to cope with a new dimension.

But the 2002 finals in South Korea and Japan -- with the exception of the co-hosts -- have thrown together so many teams who draw

the bulk of their squads from teams in Europe that the surprise results are no longer so surprising.

Take Senegal, shock conquerors of France in the opening game of the tournament. All but two of their squad play their club football in France and the entire team fielded against their former colonial masters play in the French first division.

Senegal were almost more French than France -- coach Roger Lemerre described the match as one between Frenchmen who play abroad and Senegalese who play in France -- and that knowledge of the domestic game was clearly a factor in their win.

Ecuador coach Hernan Dario Gomez says his team's poor results and Argentina's shock defeat show there is a growing gulf between European and South American soccer.

"Potentially Europe is much more capable than South America and the best example of this is the loss of Argentina," Gomez told reporters.

Playing in their first finals, Ecuador lost both their opening matches against Italy and Mexico.

"Europe has stronger players than our countries. When you see

SEE PAGE 14 COL 5



'HEARD ABOUT ARGENTINA SKIPPER?' Italian ace Francesco Totti (R) tells something to captain Paolo Maldini during a training session at Oita yesterday.



BIG PHILL & HIS DEADLY GANG! Brazil coach Luis Filipe Scolari (2nd from R) blows his whistle during practice while Rivaldo (R), Ronaldo (L) and Lucio look on at Seoul yesterday.

## BRAZIL VS COSTA RICA

# No samba favour

REUTERS, Suwon

Outsiders Costa Rica, need a point against Brazil on Thursday to make the second round but they are not expecting any favours even though the four-times champions are already qualified.

Although Rio de Janeiro and San Jose are further apart than London and Tehran, the fact that both teams are Latin American has meant that they have already had to field questions about whether Brazil will try

their hardest.

Turkey, who need Costa Rica to lose to have any chance of qualifying, have complained about just about anything since arriving in South Korea and will almost certainly point fingers of suspicion if the Central Americans snatch a surprise point.

To add to the intrigue, Costa Rica coach Alexandre Guimaraes was born in Brazil.

But both Brazil and Costa Rica are adamant that the game will be as competitive as any at the tourna-

ment so far.

"I would say to them (Turkey) that if they are doubting Brazil, they should not because here we are serious professionals and we really want to qualify in first place," said central defender Roque Junior.

Midfielder Ricardinho added: "We have a great responsibility for our people and for the Brazilian journalists who are here and above all we have a great responsibility for

SEE PAGE 15 COL 2

## Chittagong shocked

SHAHIDUL ISLAM, Chittagong

As soon as the 'do or die' match between Argentina and Sweden ended, some frustrated fans of the Latin American nation here immediately took to the street and burnt some flags of their favourite team in front of Chittagong Press Club at Jamal Khan area yesterday.

To add to their misery, Brazil supporters were seen in many parts of the port city partying, beating drums and exploding firecrackers to celebrate the early elimination of their traditional rivals.

Dejected Argentine fans started to pull down flags from the top of buildings and shops when the final whistle was blown.

However, hundreds of new flags of Brazil took their place soon afterwards.

## Pua quits

BBC, undated

Uruguay coach Victor Pua has resigned from his post after his side was eliminated from the World Cup on Tuesday.

Down 3-0 to Senegal at half-time, Uruguay battled back to draw 3-3 but it was not enough to prevent the South Americans from exiting the competition.

"With this match, an era ends. It's my decision," Pua said after the match.

The favourite to replace Pua is Nacional coach Hugo de Leon.

Pua stepped into the role in early 2001 after Argentine Daniel Passarella was dumped from the post.

He guided the side to their first World Cup since 1990 after they beat Australia in a play-off over two legs.

Before announcing his retirement Pua criticised Dutch referee

SEE PAGE 14 COL 1

## CUP CORNER

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea's crime rate plunged during the first 10 days of the World Cup finals, a police report said on Wednesday, as football fever gripped the country and as fears of hooliganism at the tournament proved unfounded.

A total of 10,824 crimes have been reported in South Korea since the finals began on May 31, a drop of 21 percent compared with the 10 days before the finals, the National Police Agency report showed.

The figures were released days after more than a quarter of a million Korean fans thronged the streets of central Seoul in a passionate but

SEE PAGE 15 COL 4

## TODAY'S MATCHES

Costa Rica vs Brazil Venue: Suwon Time: 12:30 pm	Turkey vs China Venue: Seoul Time: 12:30 pm	Mexico vs Italy Venue: Oita Time: 5:30 pm	Ecuador vs Croatia Venue: Yokohama Time: 5:30 pm
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