

Palancas negras hailed

AFP, Luanda

Angola's sole newspaper on Thursday hailed the national team for scoring the first goal of their short World Cup finals history in the game against Iran even though they failed to make it through to the last 16.

"Even if they have not succeeded in qualifying ... they showed proof of dignity and personality," the *Jornal de Angola* said.

"The Palancas negras (national team) shook the all-powerful Portugal, they drew with Mexico and almost won against Iran," it said.

Angola on Wednesday drew 1-1 with Iran in their final Group D match, signalling the end of their remarkable journey in Germany.

They had narrowly lost 1-0 to Euro 2004 finalists Portugal earlier and scored a goalless draw with Mexico.

It was the first time that the southern African country, which was ravaged by a 27-year civil war that ended in 2002, had made an appearance in a World Cup finals.

Angola's ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) also showered praise on the team.

"The nation is proud of the attitude of the players attitude ... who have brought honour and glory to Angola," a statement said.

Angola: One for the road

AFP, Leipzig

Angola coach Luis Oliveira Goncalves predicted on Wednesday that African football was on the march after his minnows completed a World Cup campaign that defied all expectations.

The southern African nation, which only emerged from civil war in 2002, qualified for their first appearance in a World Cup finals while the big guns of their continent -- Nigeria, Senegal and Cameroon -- were all left to watch the tournament at home.

Angola were tipped as one of the World Cup's whipping boys, and thrashings by Group D rivals Portugal and Mexico were widely predicted.

But if a narrow 1-0 defeat to Euro 2004 finalists Portugal established their credentials, they came of age in a heroic goalless draw with Mexico as more than 100,000 people celebrated in the streets of the Angolan capital, Luanda.

The team of journeymen professionals, whose best players cannot even find a club, could even have sneaked into the second round if they had beaten Iran by three clear goals.

Eventually an Iranian side desperate to avoid returning home to an unforgiving public with three defeats in a row held the Angolans to a 1-1 draw and ended their hopes.

Oliveira Goncalves said the fact that his team had reached their first finals was a positive sign for the continent.

"African football is progressing. We know that we can do more than we are doing now and each time we take part in a tournament it shows that we have to improve our infrastructure, our organisation and our training of young players."

"But one day the world will realise Africa has a name to defend and it will defend its reputation," he said.

However the coach was also quick to acknowledge that basic lapses in defending cost Angola a memorable victory -- a defender failing to cover a post allowed Iran's Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh to equalise Flavio's goal.

"We were not able to play our normal, counter-attacking game today. Iran just kept coming at us."

"I am proud of the way my players performed. Iran have been in three World Cups but this was our first."

"We have every reason to be proud. We will leave with our heads held high."

Flavio, assured of a place in history as the scorer of his country's first ever World Cup goal, said the team were satisfied that they had given the best possible account of themselves.

"It was very good for us to show that Angola can play good football," said the striker who plays for African Champions Cup winners Al Ahly of Egypt.

Meanwhile, for the team's two outstanding players, Akwa and goalkeeper Joao Ricardo, the bright lights of the World Cup will fade as they go in search of a club.

They have surely done enough to catch a new employer's eye.



Big Phil's perfect 10



AFP, Gelsenkirchen

England are through to the World Cup's last 16, but London football chiefs will be looking wistfully at Group D where their former target Luiz Felipe Scolari is giving Portugal the full benefit of his World Cup masterclass.

Just two months after snubbing England's advances, Scolari's Portugal have romped through the first round with maximum points, letting in only one goal in the process.

Wins against Angola, Iran and Mexico have put Portugal through for only the second time in their history -- and the first since Eusebio led them to the 1966 semis.

The World Cup-winning coach has notched up a record 10 consecutive wins in the tournament, including seven four years ago when he led his native Brazil to the title.

After reaching the Euro 2004 final, Scolari's team are now unbeaten in 17 matches stretching back to February 2005, the best streak in Portuguese history.

Scolari's 30 wins are also the highest number by any Portugal coach, surpassing Antonio Oliveira's record.

"Ten wins in the World Cup is the kind of thing that would mark anybody's life, especially mine," Scolari told after their match

against Mexico.

Statistics aside, Scolari gave a telling reminder of his coaching brilliance when Portugal beat Mexico 2-1 on Wednesday despite resting five first-team players.

"It's great not to have dropped any points. We have stacked up three good wins and now we must build on that. It wasn't all good today," Scolari said.

"From now on it's knockout matches and even the best teams



LUIZ FELIPE SCOLARI

taking tournaments one game at a time."

"It's only the second time Portugal has qualified for the second round in 40 years but we have to look at it game by game," he said.

"All the teams are very balanced and very even, they're in good condition. There are five or six teams which I believe are the best, they might be playing very well but one day they can have an off-day and be eliminated."

Blending youth with experience, Scolari has kept faith with remnants of Portugal's 'golden generation' like Luis Figo while injecting the pace and energy of Cristiano Ronaldo and Miguel.

His introduction of the Brazilian-born Deco, controversial at the time, now seems like a masterstroke with the busy playmaker at the hub of most attacking moves.

With Maniche holding in midfield and Ricardo Carvalho marshalling a miserly defence, Portugal look sharp in attack, resourceful in midfield and solid at the back.

While they remain outsiders for the title, Portugal's game-by-game approach did the trick at Euro 2004 and contrasts sharply with England, who have been talking up their title chances for months.

The two are on course for a quarterfinal meeting here -- a worrying prospect for England, who have been dumped out of the last two major tournaments at the same stage by Scolari's Brazil and Portugal.

Dutch goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar makes a diving save to deny Argentina forward Carlos Tevez (R) during their Wednesday's match in Frankfurt.

Reserves make Basten happy



AFP, Frankfurt

Dutch coach Marco van Basten said he was satisfied with his team's goalless draw with Argentina that saw them line up a game against Group D winners Portugal in the last 16 of the World Cup.

The Dutch play the Portuguese in Nuremberg on Sunday.

"Argentina are certainly a high-quality squad. We were able to get a draw. At the end we had a few chances and also could have won the game," said van Basten.

"It was a good game considering the players who stayed on the

bench," he said in reference to Arjen Robben, Mark van Bommel and Giovanni van Bronckhorst, three of the squad's most creative players.

Argentina had a raft of chances throughout the match, and van Basten had two fine first-half clearances by defender Khalid Boulahrouz and one outstanding save late in the game by Edwin van der Sar to thank for a clean sheet.

Argentine strikers Lionel Messi and Carlos Tevez, along with midfield duo Maxi Rodriguez and Juan Riquelme, caused havoc in the Dutch defence early on with their tight combinations of fast, accurate passing and blistering counter-attacking speed.

After Argentina replaced Messi and Riquelme in the second-half, they took their foot off the pedal and both sides seemed content to

play out for a draw.

"We didn't have the best players on the pitch and we kept it at 0-0 and we can be proud of that," van Basten said, heaping praise on his defence which improved massively after veteran Phillip Cocu and Wesley Sneijder dropped deeper to help out.

Cocu, who was winning his 100th cap against the South Americans, said the team were "really very happy. Up against one of the best teams in the world, we contained their attacking game very well."

"Sunday's game is more important than the game against Argentina. Either you win on Sunday or you go back to the Netherlands."

"Preparations will not change. If we're lucky, we've got four finals to go, matches where you can make no errors because you cannot go back on them."

"We'll have to play on the basis of sound organisation and the implementation of everything we've done in previous games."

"We have every chance to move onto the next round, I think."

Iran in a dilemma



AGENCIES, undated

Iran were left to find new leadership on Thursday, a day after their hopes for at least one victory in the World Cup were shattered by finishing bottom of their group with one point.

The team that had hailed themselves as Iran's best ever side, simply did not have the experience to keep up 90 minutes at a time, with the younger players' power fading fast in the second halves.

The more experienced members of the squad, some of whom play for clubs abroad, were plagued by injuries and never got into full form, with FC Bayern's Ali Karimi just one case in point.

But on Wednesday, Iran midfielder Mehdi Mahdavikia said they should have won.

"There is no question we were the better side. We also created better chances and it is a real

shame we did not capitalise on them," he told reporters.

"We are out of the World Cup with just a single point to our name and we should have done better. That is annoying."

Still, while there are question marks over who will coach Iran in the future, Mahdavikia said the mix of old players -- such as 37-year-old record scorer Ali Daei -- and young players stood the team in good stead for the future.

If Iran's players were disappointed with their early elimination, their departure helped scupper a potential diplomatic run-in.

Iran president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had left open whether he would visit the World Cup, has faced criticism across Europe in the past for inflammatory remarks about Israel and statements questioning whether the Holocaust happened.

While European leaders stopped short of banning him from visiting, they made it clear he would have faced a frosty welcome.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian defender Rahman Rezaei (L) and midfielder Andranik Teymourian (C) are locked in an aerial battle with Angolan forward Akwa during their Group D match at Leipzig on Wednesday.

Lavolpe plotting a coup

AFP, Gelsenkirchen

Mexico's coach talked up their chances against Argentina after booking a second-round meeting with the World Cup favourites.

Ricardo Lavolpe, a member of Argentina's World Cup-winning squad in 1978, said a different Mexico would take the field on Saturday than the one that scrambled into the second round after defeat by Portugal.

"On Saturday I'm going to have a different team. They're going to be much more at ease and that will help them to score goals," Lavolpe said.

"We start with a clean sheet, it's 0-0 with no advantage to either side and we play for 90 minutes."

The Group D seeds flirted with a shock elimination on Wednesday by slipping to a 2-1 loss to Portugal, but were saved by Angola's failure to beat Iran.

In a chaotic display, Mexico gave away a penalty, missed another and had a player sent off with half-an-hour left.

Mexico had needed to win the match to avoid in-form Argentina, who hammered six past Serbia and Montenegro.

But they may feel pleased not to be playing the Netherlands. The agile but lightweight Mexicans have won just one of their last 11 World Cup games against European opponents, but beat Argentina 1-0 in 2004.

Lavolpe's biggest worry will be the profligacy of his strikers. He admitted his disbelief after Omar Bravo, a two-goal hero against Iran, wasted a series of good chances including a penalty.

"Our main problem is scoring -- we even had a penalty which we missed," Lavolpe said.

"We've got the forwards, we put the opposition goal under pressure but we need to persist and see if we can get more positive results."

Mexico scored three times against Iran but have only managed one goal in their last two games.

They qualified ahead of third-placed Angola, who could only draw with Iran. Portugal topped Group D with maximum points.

Mexico have now reached the second phase at each of the last four World Cups and are hoping to make it past the quarter-finals for the first time in 13 attempts.

Lavolpe's Argentinian nationality has made him a controversial figure in Mexico, despite his success with the national team which lies fourth in the FIFA rankings.

He also caused an uproar by dropping popular striker Cuauhtemoc Blanco while calling up two foreign-born players, Zinha and Guillermo Franco, and his own son-in-law Rafael Garcia.



AFP, Munich

Serbia and Montenegro bowed out of international football with the weakest record in the 2006 World Cup, hoping to rise from the ashes of the tournament as plain Serbia before the first Euro 2008 qualifiers in the autumn.

The Balkan side had maintained a virtually clean sheet in qualifying and emerged from their group ahead of the more fancied Spain, heralding potentially one of the strongest teams in Germany.

Instead, after 3-2 defeat at the hands of Ivory Coast Wednesday, Serbia and Montenegro drew a complete blank on their points tally in the "Group of Death".

They scored just two goals, while one penetrated their previously impermeable defence.

"We gave our all today so as not to lose," said goal scorer Sasa Ilic after a more spirited performance by his side that saw them leading by two

goals before halftime.

"In the second half we had to defend more and I just sorry we're going home without having a single point."

Now the Serb-dominated squad will split into two, and re-form as two separate teams under as yet unnamed coaches after the contested Ilija Petkovic decided to stand down.

Petkovic said he was "very proud" of what the squad had achieved in the last match despite rows about his coaching and a rash of injuries through the tournament -- and against the Elephants -- that deprived him of play.

Petkovic said while he did not normally like to comment on the referee, he felt that the Mexican Marco Rodriguez had been too harsh on his side.

"By awarding two penalties against us he allowed Ivory Coast to dominate the game," said the 60-year-old former Yugoslav international.