

Panel

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DHAKA FRIDAY JULY 7, 2006

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## Domenech hails his highness

AFP, Munich

Raymond Domenech hailed the contribution made by Zinedine Zidane in firing France into the World Cup final in what will be the midfield master's last match before retirement.

The French legend set up this glorious last twist to his glittering career with a 33rd minute penalty against Portugal to give Les Bleus a 1-0 victory and a second shot at a title eight years after Zizou's two bullet headers lifted them to their first in the 3-0 win over Brazil.

"Zidane is a world champion, his photograph adorns a wall in Marseille, he's a true star, a true star in the sense that he brings something to this team and enables the French public to go on dreaming," purred Domenech.

"But it's been that way for years." He added: "This game really is his last, people were talking about other games here could be his final one, now it's actually arrived."

"But for me I'm not regarding it as Zidane's last match. For me it's the World Cup final, and he regards it like that as well, he doesn't see it as his swansong."

"It's the World Cup final, and even better... it's against Italy."

"We shouldn't mix things up, he would agree with that - he's proved that throughout this whole competition." Domenech's own stock - like Aime Jacquet in 1998 - has risen sharply throughout the competition.

As France struggled through their group his name was jeered, now he's regarded as a hero, with one sign held up at the Allianz Arena declaring: "Thanks Raymond, you were right... July 9 (the date of the final)".

France, marshalled by Zidane's genius, had powered past Brazil in the quarter-finals but Domenech reckoned the test set by Portugal was a lot more exacting.

"Portugal put us in more difficulty than Brazil, it was harder at every level."

They gave us lots of problems right to the end, congratulations to them for that."

At one stage he was seen having words with Portugal manager Luiz Felipe Scolari but he declined to divulge what had passed between them.

"I don't want to talk about the behaviour of a rival, it's not my concern, my only concern is the France team."

Domenech then turned to France's opponents in Sunday's final in Berlin.

"For me there have been two exploits at this World Cup. Ours, in beating Brazil, and Italy's in beating Germany in Dortmund. That was an exploit accomplished with style, bravo I say, I take my hat off to them."

"Now we have a date together - July 9, at eight o'clock."

## Nesta out of final

INTERNET, undated

Italy defender Alessandro Nesta will not be fit for the World Cup Final against France, Azzurri medics have revealed.

There were hopes that the Milan stopper would recover from a groin strain in time for Berlin, but they have been dashed on Thursday.

"Unfortunately, from a clinical and physical point of view, it won't be possible for him to be at the side's disposal," stated team doctor Enrico Castellacci.

Nesta originally picked up the problem in a pre-tournament friendly against Ukraine, but was still able to feature in the World Cup opener versus Ghana.

However, the Lazio youth team product had a recurrence of the injury in the 2-0 win over the Czech

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PHOTO: AFP

AS COOL AS A CUCUMBER: France captain Zinedine Zidane celebrates his strike from penalty in his own style in the World Cup semifinal against Portugal at Munich's Allianz Arena on Wednesday.

## Henry never had a doubt

AFP, Munich

France striker Thierry Henry said after his nation beat Portugal on Wednesday to reach the World Cup final that he had never listened to the critics who savaged the team when they made a poor start to the tournament.

A 33rd-minute penalty scored by Zinedine Zidane settled a low-key match 1-0 in France's favour and earned the French a trip to the final against Italy in Berlin's Olympic Stadium on Sunday and a chance to add to the trophy they won in 1998.

Henry said France had never doubted they would come good after struggling through their first-round group with draws against Switzerland and South Korea before clinching qualification with a 2-0 win over Togo.

"It is true that we were not playing well, people were saying we were too old. That was pretty harsh, but as soon as you step it up it works," Henry said.

"We were not listening to it, we were playing as a team. That is what the team is all about."

He said the key to France's victory had been their resolute defence after he himself had earned the spot kick when he was tripped by Ricardo Carvalho.

"We defended like lions. After we got the penalty, the way we defended was great," Henry said.

He predicted a "tight game" against Italy, who France beat in a dramatic Euro 2000 final.

## French press shower praises on Les Bleus

AFP, Paris

France's reaching the World Cup final, where they will attempt to regain the trophy they won in 1998, was heralded in the country's press mirroring the euphoria of a whole nation.

The press had been very critical of Raymond Domenech's men at the start of the June 9 to July 9 finals but there was nothing but praise after their 1-0 victory over Portugal in Munich which earned them a Berlin final showdown with Italy on Sunday.

"The goal of their life," was the headline in sports daily L'Equipe who said the Blues "had once more surprised by surpassing themselves."

"This reaching of a second World Cup final, eight years after 1998, proves the excellence of a generation of players as well as the whole French football set-up."

"The entire planet now knows that France can excel at a World Cup on foreign soil. Now they only have the final left, the last match in Zinedine Zidane's career which has to be won, of course, because a lost final is hugely disappointing."

"But the Blues can be proud of what they have already accomplished."

The front page of the Liberation newspaper announced: "Sunday in Berlin," adding the victory against

Portugal was more than they would ever have hoped.

"Yesterday the Blues travelled through Hell. They did not stop talking to each other, encouraging each other and got stuck in liked condemned souls."

"Their performance merited the reward of reaching the final."

Communist newspaper L'Humanite said the Blues would go on to win the World Cup, saying the Portuguese left the tournament "with regrets" but for the French "they have a sumptuous gift of a glorious farewell to offer Zidane."

Daily newspaper Le Parisien said merely: "Fabulous," and emphasised "a penalty from the maestro (Zidane) was enough to beat Portugal and set them on their way to Berlin where they will meet old rivals Italy on Sunday."

The paper said a statue of Zidane would have to be erected immediately. "It does not matter where," the paper continued. "In Marseille, where he learned his football, or in Turin, where he accomplished a lot for Juventus."

"He entered into legend last night in Munich."

France Soir reported "We're there!" saying after the Spanish, Brazilians and Portuguese, Zidane and the Blues now need to beat Italy in the final.

The paper said the powers that be were on France's side. "The gods are with us," adding, "The Italians will be trembling in their boots."

## Joy across the Mediterranean

AFP, Paris

Thousands of celebrating fans occupied the Champs-Elysees here on Wednesday as France qualified for its second World Cup final in eight years.

"We're in the final," the crowd chanted on the renowned avenue where one million people celebrated when France won the World Cup on home soil in 1998.

They will have another chance to gather on Sunday when France take on Italy in Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

Elsewhere in the capital, 25,000 fans gathered at the Charlety stadium to follow the action from Munich.

A first-half penalty from Zinedine Zidane settled the match in Munich, sparking wild scenes of celebration.

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**THIRD EYE**

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

Deja vu, Euro 2000. We now have our two finalists -- the Azzurri and the Les Bleus (Italy and France for those not well versed in nicknames). Take your pick will you? So did the two best teams make it? Yes and no.

Yes in Italy's case and no in case of the French. But when Zinedine Zidane is playing such outstanding football, who are we wish him stop? The more the merrier we say! Allez Zizou! Allez Les Blues and not to forget Forza Azzurri!

Anyhow diversion from the topic at hand is a trait we better avoid. Therefore let us get to how the French made it into their second final in eight years to complete a remarkable peak-drop-peak journey.

If the first semifinal was a yardstick to judging this one, then it would end as a disappointment. There was relatively no drama, very little incident, not as much intensity as well but as far as a game of football goes it was a good enough spectacle. Maybe not worthy of a World Cup semifinal but hey, we all needed a rest after that adrenaline pumping 120 minutes in Dortmund!

Portugal started brightly, in a free flowing end to end opening that was characterised by the referees whistle - or lack thereof. Sepp Blatter must have had a word with the men in the middle because there was a glaring lack of yellow on display. We know that no one likes cards being brandished needlessly but when you see people get away with dives like Ronaldo and Helder Postiga then there must be something wrong.

In defence of Sepp however, his advice to 'go easy' meant that we were treated with a first ten minutes devoid of a single foul something unheard of in this day and age.

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## Scolari accepts it

REUTERS, Munich

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari paid tribute to France after they ended his dreams of a second successive World Cup triumph with a 1-0 semifinal defeat of his team on Wednesday.

Zinedine Zidane's first-half penalty doomed Scolari, who had guided Brazil to victory in 2002 in South Korea and Japan, to his first World Cup finals defeat in 13 matches.

After the final whistle, Scolari angrily berated the officials on the field for the 33rd-minute penalty decision against Ricardo Carvalho but he later conceded that France had deserved to go through to Sunday's final against Italy.

"It was deserved victory, defi-

nately, for France.

"There are situations that are difficult. We did everything we could. We did our best. Congratulations to France," he told reporters.

"We have to accept this. We knew it would be a difficult match and had a few chances but, unfortunately, didn't do it and lost."

Scolari's future as Portugal coach will now be open to further speculation after he was reported in British and Portuguese media to be on the verge of becoming England boss before the World Cup finals.

"I have a contract until the end of July then we'll see what happens," he said.

England have since appointed Steve McClaren as manager but Brazil, who lost in the quarterfinals to France too, are widely expected

to have a vacancy as coach shortly.

Eusebio, one of Portugal's footballing greats whose side lost to winners England in the 1966 World Cup semifinals, paid tribute to Scolari's team.

"The luck factor was not on Portugal's side today," he told Portuguese television channel SIC.

"The players deserve to be congratulated. But it is still not over; sadly we are not in the final but we have a game ahead and that game has a price as well which is the bronze."

Portugal will face hosts Germany, who lost 2-0 to Italy in extra time on Tuesday, in the third-place playoff match on Saturday in Stuttgart.

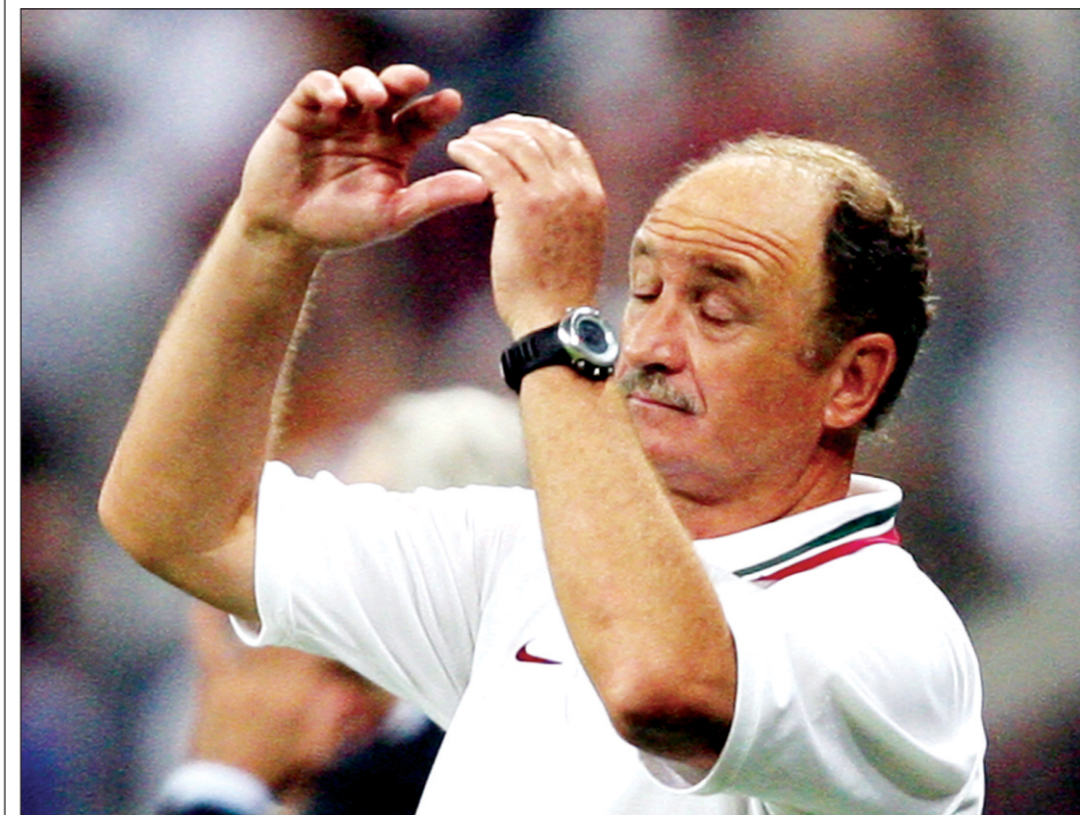


PHOTO: AFP

IF WE COULD PLAY UPTO TO THIS LEVEL: Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari tries to come to terms with his team's defeat to France in the World Cup semifinal on Wednesday.

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