

Pakistan hails its Wimbledon hero

Tennis

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan on Wednesday celebrated a Wimbledon win by rising local star Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi, a rare tennis success in this cricket-obsessed South Asian nation.

The 27-year-old -- the first Pakistani to play in the Wimbledon men's singles since Haroon Rahim in 1976 -- outsmarted Britain's Lee Childs 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (8/6) on his maiden Wimbledon singles appearance on Tuesday.

He now plays Russian Marat Safin in the second round, but win or lose, Qureshi's achievement was so unusual that it even pushed cricket off the sports pages of the newspapers.

Former great Khawaja Saeed Hai, who played the main rounds at Wimbledon for three consecutive years from 1954 to 1956, hailed Qureshi's "brilliant" performance.

"I used to get the world's top players in the first round but Qureshi got a lucky draw and won," said Hai,

who also played the US and French Open in 1960s.

"Now it is up to him to cash in and although Safin is not playing well these days the Russian would still be difficult to beat."

Qureshi's only previous experience of Wimbledon was in the doubles in 2002, when he created a storm by opting to defy the Pakistani Tennis Federation and play with Israel's Amir Hadad.

Pakistan, an Islamic republic, does not recognise the Jewish state.

The best performance by any Pakistani in a Wimbledon singles competition was by Haroon Rahim who reached the second round 31 years ago.

Hai said Qureshi's win must lift tennis in Pakistan, where it is overshadowed by cricket, hockey and squash.

"In the old days even my wins over English champions in tournaments never made a line in the newspapers, but now the media has projected Aisam's win and I hope that younger players will try to emulate his achievements," said

Hai.

Qureshi's win in the first round was covered by all the leading television channels while newspapers also joined in saluting the gutsy player from Lahore.

"It's child's play for Aisam as he sets up Safin date," wrote The News in its sports pages.

Khalid Rehmani, president of the tennis federation of southern Sindh province, said Qureshi had not only done Pakistan proud but also given a boost to tennis across Asia.

"Just four to five players from Asia play in the main rounds of a Grand Slam these days and Qureshi is among them. It will help tennis in Asia and I hope he extends his run by beating Safin which is not impossible," said Rehmani.

Qureshi admitted he had fulfilled his life's ambition after his first-round win.

"It is going to be mad back home and I hope my win goes a long way in promoting tennis in Pakistan," Qureshi told a private television channel.



PHOTO: AFP

Soccer legend Diego Maradona of Argentina kicks off the Copa America as Venezuela President Hugo Chavez (C) looks on in San Cristobal on Tuesday.

Angola's Maurito Marseille-bound

AFP, Luanda

Angola international Maurito is set to follow in the footsteps of a string of African football stars after announcing Tuesday that he had agreed to join French giants Marseille next season.

Maurito, who has been playing most recently for Al-Wahda in Abu Dhabi, told Angolan media that the allure of playing Champions League football had proved irresistible.

"The fact that it is a team that will compete in the European

Champions League is something that is good to relaunch my career," he was quoted as saying by the state news agency Angop.

Maurito, whose full name is Roberto Mulenessa, missed out on the Black Antelopes' appearance in last year's World Cup finals in Germany after suffering a serious leg injury.

Bronckhorst heads back home

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona defender Giovanni van Bronckhorst is set for a return home after signing for former club Feyenoord, the Spanish giants announced Wednesday.

Van Bronckhorst had extended his contract with Barcelona in December until 2008, however a clause allowing him to leave if clubs showed an interest in signing him was included.

The Dutchman, who has 67 caps and four goals for his country, won two Spanish league titles with Barcelona and a Champions League title.

The 32-year-old played for Rotterdam-based Feyenoord in 1993-1998, after which he played for Rangers then Arsenal.

Wenger's Arsenal future in the balance

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood has said he is hopeful that Arsene Wenger will stay on with the club as coach, but admitted that his future hung in the balance.

The Frenchman has one year left to run on his contract and the transfer of star striker Thierry Henry to Barcelona has cast further doubts on whether he will sign a new deal.

Henry had said that the departure of chairman David Dein and the uncertainty surrounding Wenger's

position were key factors in his decision to leave Arsenal, but Hill-Wood said he was doubtful.

"I am not particularly worried about what Thierry said but whether it really influenced his decision or not we will have to wait and see," he told the Daily Telegraph.

"We certainly don't think Thierry Henry going and Arsene Wenger's contract situation are in any way linked. That was just an excuse."

Hill-Wood said that he hoped Wenger would remain at Arsenal, even if he does not sign a new deal this summer.

"I am really hopeful he will extend but at this moment I am only in a

position of hoping," he said.

"I've no reason to think that he won't but at the same time I have no reason to believe he will stay yes. Certainly we would like to see him sign a new contract - we have made no secret about that.

"But we have not talked any details about anything with him or the board. We will wait and see what he wants to do. Then we can sit down and discuss things if he is positive about it. I am very relaxed. We are in good shape."

Hill-Wood also said that Arsenal were still keenly watching the transfer market and would be eager to sign a player or two.

Security up for Asian Cup

Football

AFP, Singapore

Bomb squads, sniffer dogs and armed police are being deployed as security is ramped up in cities hosting the Asian Cup finals, although authorities are playing down any threats.

Sixteen teams from around the region, boasting some of the world's top players, will converge on Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam in coming days to prepare for the tournament from July 7, and no chances are being taken.

In Bangkok, where a military junta is in charge after seizing power in a bloodless coup last year, police issued reassurances that the safety of players and fans was paramount.

"We are ready. We will deploy all our equipment, including bomb squads and dogs," said Lieutenant General Phanu Kerdlarphol, deputy head of Bangkok's metropolitan police.

About 13,000 soldiers have been on standby in Bangkok since mid-June as protests against the junta gather steam. About 15,000 people attended a rally on June 15 and 6,000 marched to the army headquarters on July 23.

"We are confident it will run smoothly as the participating countries are not rivals. We don't expect anything bad or serious to happen," added Phanu.

Bangkok hosts Australia, Iraq, Oman and Thailand.

Phanu also played down fears of attacks by separatist insurgents from

the kingdom's Muslim-majority south, where rebels are waging a bloody battle for a separate state.

"I also don't think the insurgency will be a threat but we are providing full security," Phanu said.

A string of bomb attacks in Bangkok on New Year's Eve killed three people and injured 42. No one has yet been charged, and it is still unclear whether they were related to the insurgency.

In Jakarta, the scene of several deadly bombings in recent years, including at the Marriott hotel in 2003 and the Australian embassy in 2004, hotels have drastically tightened their security.

All cars entering are checked by police while visitors must walk through metal detectors and have their bags searched.

"We will provide the usual security protection to the players and officials, especially foreigners," Jakarta police spokesman Ketut Untung Yoga Ana said.

"Security will be provided from the time they arrive at the airport, at the hotel where they are staying, at the training ground, as well as match venues and everywhere they go, if they request it.

"We are preparing for all kinds of threats to the players, including bombs and hooliganism."

Evacuation routes have been planned at the main stadium in Jakarta, which will host the final on July 27.

South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Indonesia are based in the Indonesian capital.

Mustafa Mohamad, director of

internal security with the Royal Malaysian Police, said no trouble was anticipated in his country.

"We consider Malaysia a safe country. There are no threats," he said.

"Some 600 police officers will be deployed during the tournament. Our boys are highly trained, we are taking every step to ensure the safety and security of the officials and players."

"The moment they land, there will be a police escort. The hotel, training ground and stadium will be secured by police."

Communist Vietnam pledged to meet all the conditions for co-hosting the tournament, including ensuring tight security, but refused to give details.

"The police ministry is responsible for combating any kind of hooliganism and violence in Vietnamese stadiums where Asian Cup matches will take place," said Hoang Chuyen Can, the Vietnam Football Federation official in charge of security.

"We cannot provide details of specific security measures."

Trouble in football-mad Vietnam is rare although last month a national championship match was abandoned when rioting fans threw stones and bottles onto the pitch and set fires.

Vietnam, Japan, Qatar and UAE play in Hanoi.

Pride brings Viduka back

Football

AFP, Singapore

Mark Viduka says the pride of wearing the Australian shirt was behind his last-minute decision to play in the Asian Cup, insisting there was no pressure from new club Newcastle to miss the tournament.

The 31-year-old, preparing with the Socceroos in Singapore ahead of their first match on July 8, shelved international retirement plans at the 11th hour because playing for his country meant too much.

"Initially I was in two minds. I didn't know whether to retire or not and I mentioned it to Arnie (coach Graham Arnold) and I said it looks like I will go that way," Viduka told Sydney's Daily Telegraph newspaper here.

"Then the next two days I had a good think about it and I just felt it meant too much for me to play for Australia and just to give it away like that.

"I made the decision myself." Viduka arrived here on Sunday after completing his move to Newcastle from Middlesbrough and taking a holiday in Croatia.

He told the paper there was no pressure from Newcastle to miss the tournament to remain fresh for the new English Premier League season, adding that he was looking forward to playing with new teammate Michael Owen.

"I'm not sure if he's staying. I've been on holidays but what's happening at Newcastle is exciting. We've got new owners and it looks very promising," Viduka said.

Viduka is a key part of Arnold's tactics for the Asian Cup with his ability to hold the ball and play as a lone striker supported by a fast-

moving midfield.

Now he is with the squad he is feeling relaxed and quietly confident that Australia can win the Asian Cup at their first attempt.

"We have a good chance. I don't want to be too cocky but we're quietly confident," he said. "It's no good us yelling and screaming how good we are, we've got to show it."

"It's different to the World Cup, you can't compare it to the World Cup, that's the biggest tournament in the world.

"But for us there's a big pride factor here. It's our first time in Asia and hopefully we can show how good we are."

Australia play a warm-up game against Singapore on Saturday before heading to Bangkok next week where they take on Oman in their opening Asian Cup match on July 8.