

Brazil atop Argentina crash again

AFP, Recife



Robinho scored in the 40th minute and Nilmar netted the winner in the 49th as Brazil seized sole possession of first place in South American 2010 World Cup qualifying by beating Paraguay 2-1.

Paraguay shared the qualifying table lead with Brazil entering Wednesday's showdown and grabbed a 1-0 in the 25th minute on an own goal by Brazil's Elano before the five-time World Cup champions battled back for the victory.

Other matches saw host Ecuador upset Argentina 2-0, Chile rise to second in the table with a 4-0 romp over visiting Bolivia, Venezuela and Uruguay play to a 2-2 draw and host Colombia blank qualifying doormat Peru 1-0.

The results left Brazil (7-1 with six drawn) atop the table on 27 points, one more than Chile (8-4 with two drawn) and three ahead of Paraguay (7-4 with three drawn) after the 14th of 18 rounds of matches.

Despite the defeat, Argentina (6-4-4) held onto the fourth and final guaranteed World Cup quali-

fyng spot on 22 points, two points ahead of Ecuador (5-4 with five drawn) and four atop Uruguay (4-4 with six drawn).

The four top teams advance to next year's global football showdown in South Africa. The fifth-place finisher faces a playoff against the fourth-place team from North American qualifying to decide a World Cup 2010 berth.

Colombia and Venezuela were level on 17 points, one back of Uruguay, with Bolivia on 12 and one-win Peru eliminated from any chance at qualifying for the World Cup.

In Quito, Ecuador pulled nearer Diego Maradona's squad thanks to goals from Walter Ayovi in the 72nd minute and Pablo Palacios in the 84th.

Manchester United standout Carlos Tevez of Argentina was denied by Argentine-born Ecuador goalkeeper Marcelo Elizaga on a penalty kick in the 29th minute, summing up a night of high-altitude frustrations for Argentina.

At Santiago, Chile stayed within one point of the lead by routing Bolivia. Jean Beausejour found the net in the 43rd minute while Marco Estrada followed in the 73rd and Alexis Sanchez added insurance markets in the 77th and 88th minutes.

Uruguay could have moved ahead of Ecuador on goal difference for the fifth spot with a victory at Venezuela but settled for a draw that kept them tight on the heels of qualifying.

Giancarlo Maldonado's goal in the ninth minute gave the hosts a half-time lead but Luis Suarez levelled in the 60th minute and Diego Forlan but Uruguay on top in the 73rd.

Just three minutes later, Jose Manuel Rey found the net with the equalizer and neither club could break the deadlock.

Colombia's Radamel Falcao Garcia scored in the 25th minute to seal Peru's fate.

South American qualifying resumes September 5 with Brazil at Argentina the headline clash. Chile will entertain Venezuela while the Uruguayans visit Peru. Ecuador travels to Colombia and Paraguay will play host to Bolivia.

STANDINGS

Standings in the South America qualifying zone for the 2010 World Cup finals (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Brazil	14	7	6	1	25	6	27
Chile	14	8	2	4	23	14	26
Paraguay	14	7	3	4	20	13	24
Argentina	14	6	4	4	19	15	22
Ecuador	14	5	5	4	18	20	20
Uruguay	14	4	6	4	23	16	18
Colombia	14	4	5	5	7	11	17
Venezuela	14	5	2	7	17	24	17
Bolivia	14	3	3	8	19	30	12
Peru	14	1	4	9	7	29	7

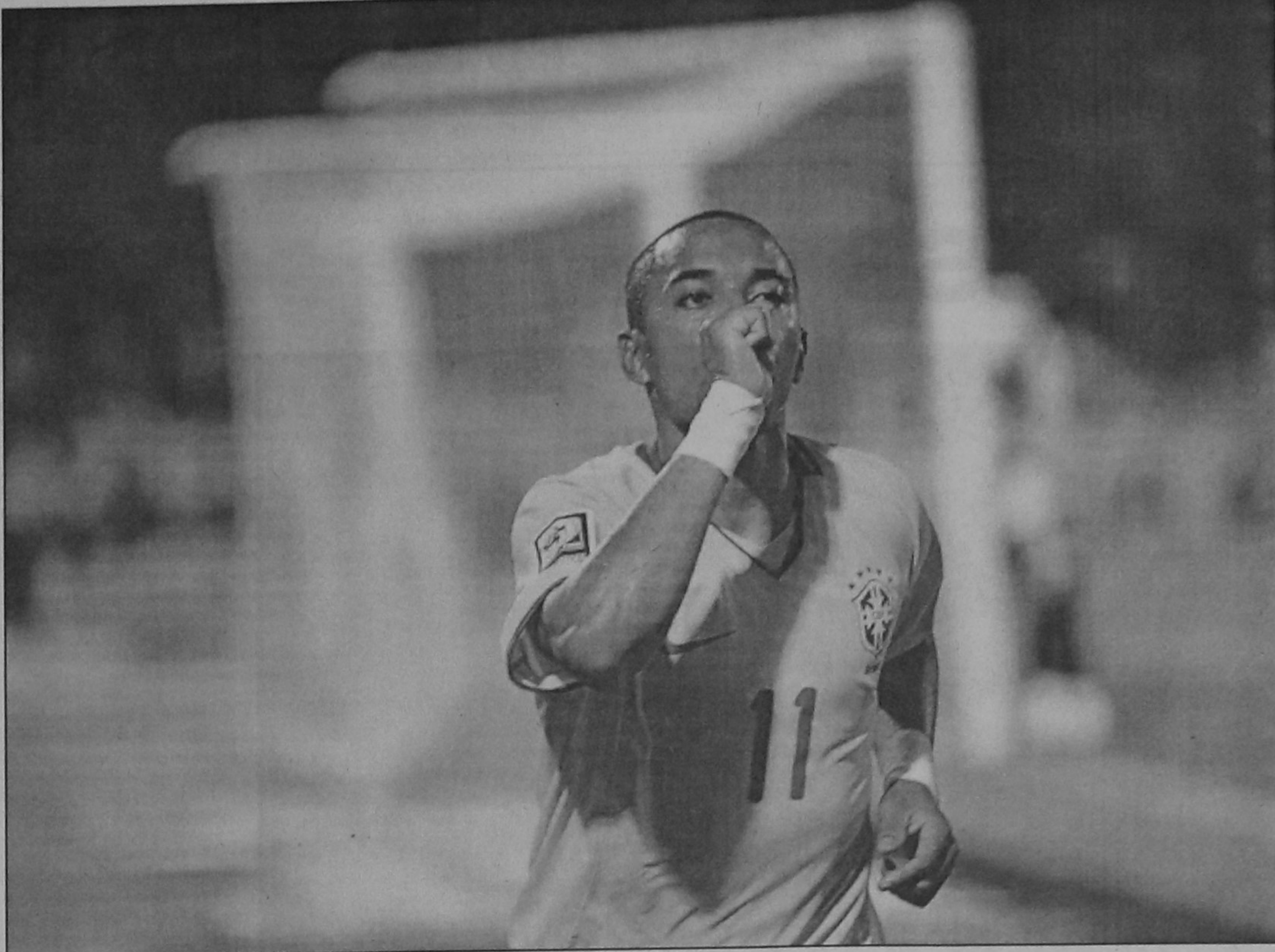


PHOTO: AFP

TRADEMARK ROBINHO: Brazil striker Robinho celebrates his goal against Paraguay during their 2010 World Cup qualifier at the Arruda Stadium in Recife on Wednesday.

England, Serbia close in

AFP, Paris



England and Serbia both took significant strides towards the 2010 World Cup in South Africa with victories in their European qualifying matches on Wednesday.

Fabio Capello's England brushed aside a limited challenge from minnows Andorra to win 6-0, while Serbia consigned the Faroe Islands to a 2-0 defeat.

England's seventh straight win means they lead Group Six by 10 points from Croatia and Ukraine, while Serbia are eight points above second-placed France in Group Seven.

Man of the match Glen Johnson set up Wayne Rooney twice in the first half, first for a third-minute header and then a crisp volley, with Frank Lampard sweeping home Theo Walcott's cut-back in between.

Rooney's second was his eighth of the campaign, making him the top scorer in European qualifying, with substitute Jermain Defoe, twice, and Peter Crouch scoring late on to add a fitting gloss to the scoreline.

England can seal qualification for the World Cup with victory over Croatia in their next game.

Ukraine are now level on points with the Croats after coming from behind to secure a narrow 2-1 win at home to Kazakhstan.

Tanat Nuserbayev gave the visitors, who are ranked 132nd in the world, a surprise 19th-minute lead, only for Sergiy Nazarenko to score either side of half-time to rescue victory for Ukraine, who reached the last eight at the 2006 World Cup.

Standard Liege forward Milan Jovanovic scored just prior to half-time to put Serbia ahead

in Torshavn, with centre-back Neven Subotic putting the match beyond the Faroe Islands with a second goal mid-way through the second-half.

Although eight points behind Radomir Antic's side, France have two games in hand and travel to Serbia on September 9.

Earlier, forgotten man Aleksandr Kerzhakov struck twice as Russia won 3-0 in Finland to move to within a point of Group Four leaders Germany.

Dinamo Moscow striker Kerzhakov, recalled after an absence of almost 19 months, opened the scoring from Andrei Arshavin's 27th-minute pass before converting a rebound early in the second half, with Konstantin Zyryanov capping an impressive victory in the 71st minute.

Guus Hiddink's side host Germany in October in a game that could decide which team qualifies automatically for next summer's showpiece and which team must make do with a place in the play-offs alongside the seven other best runners-up.

Sweden kept their slim qualification hopes intact with an emphatic 4-0 victory at home to Group One's bottom side Malta, with goals from Kim Kallstrom, Daniel Majstorovic, star striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Marcus Berg.

Lars Lagerback's men are now level on nine points with third-placed Portugal, seven points behind group leaders Denmark but only four points off second-placed Hungary and a possible play-off place.

Group Nine leaders the Netherlands, who became the first European side to qualify for the World Cup when they beat Iceland 2-1 at the weekend, won 2-0 at home to winless Norway after strikes from PSV defender Andre Ooijer and Real Madrid winger Arjen Robben.

Macedonia beat Iceland 2-0 in Skopje to move level on points with second-placed Scotland.

Seedorf happy at Milan

AFP, The Hague

AC Milan's veteran Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf pledged his future to the Serie A side on Wednesday and said he would not be joining-up with former club coach Carlo Ancelotti as FA Cup winners Chelsea.

The 33-year-old - a four-time Champions League winner and the only player to win the Champions League with three different clubs - had received an offer to join the Premier League club but had opted to stay with AC Milan, whom Ancelotti left at the end of the season to take over at Chelsea.

"I am flattered," admitted Seedorf, capped 87 times by the Dutch.

"It is fantastic to know that Ancelotti wanted me, but next season I will be at AC Milan.

"I still have a contract at Milan (for two more seasons). I am a Milan player and I feel good here.

"I hope to still be playing here for another at least three or four years," added Seedorf, who won the Champions League twice with AC Milan and once with Ajax and Real Madrid.

Platini shocked at excess fee

AFP, Paris

European football supremo Michel Platini expressed shock Thursday as Real Madrid's world record bid for Cristiano Ronaldo followed hot on the heels of the blockbuster Kaka move.

"These excessive transfers are happening almost every day," said the Frenchman, who as president of UEFA has vowed to clean up the financial side of the game and create a level economic playing field.

"These transfers are a serious challenge to the idea of fairplay and the concept of financial balance in our competitions," said Platini, who as one of the World's top players was lured to Juventus of Italy from French side St Etienne back in 1982.

Platini, who went on to win the European Player of the Year award in 1983, 1984 and 1985 explained that UEFA was planning action to put an end to football's excesses.

"UEFA is working hard with clubs to set up a new set of rules as soon as is possible to clean up the system and give it a more solid, more transparent base," Platini told AFP.

"That is our top priority today."

Platini's comments come after Real Madrid bid 94 million euros (130 million dollars) for Manchester United striker Cristiano Ronaldo Thursday, days after they paid AC Milan 65 million euros for the Brazilian midfielder Kaka.

Karimi keeps Iran alive

AFP, Tehran



Midfield star Ali Karimi scored the only goal as Iran defeated the United Arab Emirates 1-0 on Wednesday to keep their World Cup hopes alive.

Iran remain in fourth place in Asian qualifying Group B with 10 points from seven matches, one behind North Korea and Saudi Arabia.

Table-topping South Korea, with 15 points, have already made sure of their place in the finals in South Africa next year.

The second automatic qualifying spot will be decided next Wednesday when Iran travel to South Korea while the Saudis welcome North Korea to Riyadh.

"With this win we have got closer to the World Cup. I hope that with the knowledge I have of South Korea, we'll be able to celebrate our making it to the finals in Seoul next week," said Iran coach Afshin Ghotbi.

"I know many of their players. I have worked with them for many years. But they put on a good show against Saudi Arabia (in a

0-0 draw earlier Wednesday) despite already making it to the World Cup.

"I am optimistic that we will reach the finals either directly or through play offs."

Karimi struck the crucial goal on 52 minutes after drifting past two UAE defenders before unleashing a fierce drive.

"Nothing is impossible," said Karimi after a tense, must-win game for Iran in the 100,000-seater Azadi Stadium which was two-thirds empty. "We can get the desired result in Seoul."

The team who finishes third in the group will have to face the third-placed team in Group A, either Bahrain or Uzbekistan, with the eventual winner then going on to face New Zealand for a spot in the 2010 finals.

Iran have now beaten UAE 10 times in 14 matches with three games drawn.

The Iranians are trying to reach a fourth World Cup having qualified for the 1978, 1998 and 2006 finals.

Iran achieved their only win in the finals in France in 1998 when they beat arch-foe the United States 2-1.

Materazzi extends Inter stay

AFP, Rome

Italian World Cup winner Marco Materazzi has extended his contract with Serie A champions Inter Milan by one year to 2010, the UEFA website reported on Wednesday.

"He always played well when we needed him last season," said Inter president Massimo Moratti of a player who was used sparingly during the 2008-09 campaign.

"(Inter coach) Jose Mourinho has confirmed that he wants him available for another season and I was delighted to extend his contract."

Materazzi, a 35-year-old centre-back, has 41 Italy caps to his name but featured in only eight leagues matches last season, which was his eighth at the San Siro.

US, Iran may play friendly

AFP, Chicago

Iran and the United States, political foes whose football teams are each trying to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, might meet on the football field in November at Tehran.

Sunil Gulati, president of the US Soccer Federation, said Wednesday that the first US-Iran match since January of 2000 could be staged in mid-November in Iran with the Americans hopeful of setting up a rematch in late 2010 or 2011.

"We have had discussions with the Iran federation about possibly playing a game during one of the international FIFA dates in November," Gulati said.

"Obviously, these discussions are in the very preliminary stage due to the fact that both teams are still attempting to qualify for the World Cup and it is uncertain if either country would even be available to play on those dates."

"But it is something we are considering."

Iran upset the US squad 2-1 in the 1998 World Cup in France and played the Americans to a 1-1 draw in an exhibition in January of 2000 at Pasadena, California.

Soldo set for Cologne

AFP, Cologne

Croatia's Zvonimir Soldo is set to become the new coach of Bundesliga side Cologne, according to reports in the German media on Thursday.

Both the Cologne Express and Die Welt on-line claim the 41-year-old former Dinamo Zagreb boss will succeed Christian Daum who will coach Fenerbahce next season.

In his first coaching role, Soldo took over at Dinamo in January 2008 and won both the Croatian championships and the national cup, while as a midfielder player he spent ten years at VfB Stuttgart and won 61 caps for Croatia.

Iaquinta rescues Italy

Football

AFP, Atteridgeville

A second-half double from Juventus striker Vincenzo Iaquinta gave world champions Italy a nervy 4-3 victory over New Zealand in a FIFA Confederations Cup warm-up match at Super Stadium on Wednesday.

The 'All Whites' stunned Marcelo Lippi's men by taking a 2-1 half-time lead, and seemed on course for an astonishing victory when Celtic striker Chris Killen's penalty put them 3-2 up on 57 minutes.

However, Iaquinta, one of a spate of second-half substitutions, had other ideas, netting twice in the final half-hour to spare Italian blushes ahead of their first Cup game against the United States in Pretoria on Monday.

Ranked 82nd in the world, New Zealand put on a brave display and consistently troubled Italy from set pieces.

Ricki Herbert's men face European champions Spain in their opening match on Sunday. Lippi made six changes to the side that beat Northern Ireland 3-0 in Pisa last Saturday.

Davide Santon, Alessandro Gamberini and Nicolas Legrottaglie continued in defence, Gennaro Gattuso captained the side from midfield and Giuseppe Rossi was up front, this time alongside Fiorentina's Alberto Gilardino.

It was a second-string 'Azzurri' with World Cup win-

ners like Luca Toni, Andrea Pirlo and Fabio Grosso on the bench and Fabio Cannavaro rested.

Nevertheless, Italy were expected to cruise past the 'All Whites'.

Instead, Herbert's team more than held their own and took the lead after just 13 minutes when Shane Smeltz rose to

head home a Leo Bertos free kick.

Italy's class did eventually show with a stunning equaliser. Simone Pepe's glorious crossfield pass found Fabio Quagliarella surging down the left wing, and his cross was headed coolly home by Gilardino.



PHOTO: AFP

Italy striker Alberto Gilardino (L) celebrates his goal with teammate Fabio Quagliarella during their friendly match against New Zealand at the Super Stadium in Pretoria on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Mexico striker Guillermo Franco (L) is ecstatic after scoring the opening goal against Trinidad and Tobago during their 2010 World Cup qualifier at the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City on Wednesday.