N Korea end 44-year wait Milan call off Cissokho

AFP, Sydney



North Korea will play in their first World Cup for 44 years after winning the point they needed to qualify for next year's finals in South Africa.

The North Koreans held firm for a scoreless draw against Saudi Arabia in Riyadh on Wednesday to finish second in Group 2 and join winners South Korea as automatic qualifi-

It will be the first time both Koreas will be part of football's showpiece and the North's first tilt at the World Cup since their trailblazing quarter-

final appearance at the 1966 tournament in In contrast to celebrations in Pyongyang, there was gloom in Iran as they blew their qualification

chance after a 1-1 draw in their must-win match in Seoul. Saudi Arabia must now beat Bahrain in an

Asian third-place playoff and then Oceania champions New Zealand if they are to reach their fifth consecutiveWorldCup finals next year.

Bahrain qualified for September's Asian playoff with a 1-0 win over Uzbekistan in Manama to finish third behind Australia and Japan in Group 1.

The Socceroos, boosted by a brace of goals from Everton midfielder Tim Cahill, came from behind to overhaul Japan 2-1 in Melbourne to finish unbeaten and top the group by five points.

But the secretive communist North Korea dominated the headlines in the final round of Asian qualifying with their unyielding defensive performance for their first-ever win in Riyadh. The Saudis, needing to take all three points to

leapfrog North Korea into the second automatic qualifying spot, attacked from the kickoff but the visitors held out for the draw. "We battled to qualify for the World Cup

finals," coach Kim Jong-Hun said. "It was so hot in Saudi Arabia after the long journey from Korea, but the belief in the ability of the players snatched the ticket to South Africa. "We focused on defending as we had come

under a lot of pressure from the Saudis and I think our preparation for the game was one factor that earned the victory."

Losing coach Jose Peseiro said he remained

confident Saudi Arabia could still qualify through the back door as the fifth Asian team for South

"It was a game against a strong team who just came here to bag one point, and they did. I think it is a historical moment for the Koreans," Peseiro

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung killed off Iran's World Cup hopes with a secondhalf equaliser to give South Korea a 1-1 draw in

Seoul South Korea were already guaranteed to finish top of their group but the Iranians, with six of the team wearing green wrist bands to symbolise their support for defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, will not be going to their thirdWorldCup next year.

"We played too conservatively after scoring the first goal," Iranian coach Afshin Ghotbi said. "Our defence sat back and allowed South Korea to dominate the match."

In Group 1, second-half substitute Mahmood Abdulrahman struck a thunderous free-kick in the 74th minute to clinch victory for Bahrain over the Uzbeks to keep their World Cup dream alive.

Tim Cahill popped up for his match-winning brace against Japan after Australia had conceded their first goal in eight qualifiers.

Cahill scored in the 59th and 76th minutes to continue his "lucky charm" effect on the Socceroos and conjure memories of his late double when Australia came from behind to beat Japan 3-1 at the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

STANDINGS

GROUPA						5 0 5	-	175-1
Australia	8	6	2	0	12	1	20-	
Japan	8	4	3	1	11	6	15-	qualified
Bahrain	8	3	1	4	6	8	10-	playoff
Qatar	8	1	3	4	5	14	6	
Uzbekistan	8	1	1	6	5	10	4	
GROUPB								
SKorea	8	4	4	0	12	4		qualified
N Korea	8	3	3	2	7	5	12-	qualified
SArabia	8	3	3	2	8	8	12-	playoff
Iran	8	2	5	1	8	7	11	
UAE	8	0	1	7	6	17	1	
				-				

up Vermaelen

AFP, Brussels

Belgian defender Thomas Vermaelen was Thursday set to have a medical at Arsenal as he bids to complete a move to the Gunners from Dutch side Ajax.

Vermaelen told the Gazet van Antwerpen newspaper he was on the way to sign a fouryear deal with the Gunners.

"Everything is set up for the best days of my life. Arsenal are a fantastic club with a coach who backs the beautiful game. I am going to go up world but that doesn't scare me," he insisted.

"I will head off Thursday to London for the medical and sign my contract assuming all goes off as planned."

Media reports say Arsenal and Ajax have agreed a fee of around 13 million euros for the 23-year-old who has spent six years with Ajax.

Gunners snap Trumpets causing a storm in S Africa



cuss the future trumpet blown alittle." at the Confe-

which has drawn complaints from European television

stations. FIFA president Sepp Blatter told a media briefing he was aware of complaints the din of against the best strikers in the | the instrument was drowning out the commentary of broadcasters and that they wanted it banned at this tournament and next year's World Cup in

South Africa. erning body would discuss the

matter with the organisers. "It's a local sound and I don't know how it is possible to stop it," he said on Wednesday. by fighting fans.

points, will guarantee qualifi-

Saturday with Spain - by no

means inconceivable if they

repeat this level of perfor-

mance - irrespective of how

Iraq fare against New Zealand.

beat New Zealand then it will

come down to goal difference.

If they lose and the Iraqis

After their nervy curtain-

"I always said that when we go

given away free to fans, are a constant background to Confederations Cup games.

Spain midfielder Xabi Alonso said: "I think they should be banned. They make it very difficult for the players to communicate with each other and to concentrate.

do nothing for the atmosphere," he added after his

FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke said last year the vuvuzela would not be banned unless it was used as a weapon

South Africa and part of the

reason for that was the return

from injury of Everton

The South Africans turned

up at the stadium dancing and

singing and the party mood

spilled over onto the pitch as

they ran rings round New

Zealand for much of the game.

playmaker Steven Pienaar.



to South Africa, it is Africa. It's "It's noisy, it's energy,

Vuvuzelas, which have been

"They are a distraction and

Parker fires Hosts

AFP, Rustenburg



S o u t h cation if they get a draw on their Confederations Cup lives at the Royal Bafokeng

stadium built on revenue from the local platinum mines, dug themselves out of deep trouble here Wednesday with a

resounding 2-0 win over New

Zealand. After their limp opening draw, Joel Santana's 'Bafana Bafana' finally tapped into a rich seam of form with goals either side of half-time from

Bernard Parker. This was sweet redemption for the Serbia-based striker for it was he who had inadvertently blocked Kagisho Dikgacoi's goal-bound header against Iraq on Sunday.

The man of the match said: "I'd like to thank my coach who showed a lot of faith in me by starting me for this game. I liked the way we played, full of confidence."

Santana added: "We had to win this game but we played well in defence, midfield moved well and they were fast in attack."

New Zealand coach Ricki Herbert was unhappy with his side's showing.

"Some key players struggled to get going tonight. We're still chasing that elusive point and that'll be our priority on Saturday."

The Rustenburg result in front of a near-capacity 40,000 crowd boosted the 2010 World Cup hosts' prospects of qualifying for the semi-finals as Group A runners-up behind Spain, who ensured their place in the last four earlier Wednesday with a 1-0 win over

While the permutations are

SOCCERNET



FIFA is to dis- notwestern Europe. of the vuvuzela, rhythm, music, dance, drums. the noisy plastic This is Africa. We have to adapt

derations Cup

plenty, South Africa, with four raiser this was a far livelier

Blatter said soccer's gov- team's 1-0 win over Iraq.

Barca chase Mascherano

AFP, Barcelona

European champions Barcelona are hot on the trail of Liverpool's Argentine international midfielder Javier Mascherano, Catalan sports daily Sport reported Thursday.

Thew club's head of technical affairs Txiki Begiristain and director of football Raul Sanllehy met with the player's two agents for two hours at a Barcelona hotel, according to Sport, to thrash out a potential deal and "establish the interest of the two parties."

Mascherano has been dubbed unsellable by the Reds' Spanish coach Rafael Benitez, who says he would not even sell the player for 60 million euros.

Man Utd sign big-money deal

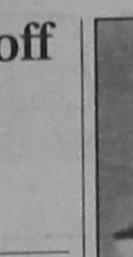
AFP, Manchester

Manchester United signed a multi-million pound partner ship deal with Chinese digital technology firm aigo on Thursday.

The five-year contract will see aigo promote United cobranded products such as cameras and mobile phones. As part of the agreement,

announced by United legend Sir Bobby Charlton at a press conference in Beijing, aigo will become the title sponsor of the Premier League champions' game in Hangzhou, China, during the club's Asia Tour this July.

United chief executive David Gill told the club's website: "This deal is a further demonstration of the global appeal of Manchester United.



INTERNET, undated

AC Milan have given up hope of signing French defender Aly Cissokho from Porto due to unsatisfactory medical tests, La Gazzetta dello Sport reported Thursday. The Serie A giants tried to renegotiate the deal with the Portuguese champions after tests revealed a dental problem that Milan believed could affect the player's pos-

Milan, who had originally agreed to pay Porto 15 million euros (21 million dollars), tried to obtain a switch to a loan deal.

"Unfortunately, Porto's request for a loan contract is too high," Milan vice president Adriano Galliani said. "The transfer of Aly Cissokho has been called off.

Cissokho, 21, was to sign a five-year contract worth million euros (1.4 million dollars) per season. He would have been Milan's first signing after the departure of Brazil star Kaka for Real Madrid.

Veterans Andriy Shevchenko, Brazilian Emerson, Englishman David Beckham, the young Swiss Philippe Senderos and the retiring Paolo Maldini also left the club.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti moved on to Chelsea and was replaced by Brazilian Leonardo.

AFP, Bloemfontein

tough Iraqi defence.

Brazil between 1993 and 1996.

by Australia, Brazil and France.

strike partner Fernando Torres.

south

2009

Brazil.

the world.

Del Bosque.

Pirlo denies wanting to leave

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan midfielder Andrea Pirlo Thursday denied through his club's website saying he could leave for Chelsea at the end of the season. The 30-yearold Italian international had been quoted by an Irish newspaper as saying that he didn't know if he was going to stay at

Perhaps its possible that I could join (former Milan coach Carlo) Ancelotti in London, Pirlo was quoted as saying by the Irish Independent after Italy beat the US 3-1 in its opening Confederations Cup match in Pretoria, South Africa.

He is a great coach, perhaps I could play with him again. I have been at Milan a long time and maybe its time for a new

chapter in my career." However, Pirlo denied make ing the comments.

"I never talked with the Irish Independent," he said. "And in general I never said to anyone what was attributed to me."

Pirlo is playing the Confederations Cup in South Africa with the Italian national team, which faces Egypt in its next game.

Spain blame the pitch

Alonso expects

INTERNET, undated

Though they beat Iraq 1-0 on Wednesday evening to claim a spot in the Confederations Cup

semifinals, Spanish players were not happy with the state of the pitch in Bloemfontein's Free State Stadium. Despite the fact that there had been unseasonably heavy rains earlier in the week, many of La Roja players said the field was overly dry, which didn't allow them to play their usual flowing football and gave an advantage to the defensive Villa and Fernando Torres.

tactics of Iraq. said playmaking midfielder Xavi after the match. "Not the grass itself, but it wasn't watered. It was a disaster."

The sparkling Barcelona Cup. man looked uncharacteristically erratic in the match against the Asian Champions and many of his passes seemed to come up short. "The ball didn't run well,"

the ball fast enough."

he confirmed. "It obviously benefits the defence. It seems like it's just going to encourage teams that don't play good football." Man of the match Xabi

Alonso confirmed that it affected the play of the European Champions. "The dry pitch made a difference for us," he said. "It defence like that. made it harder to break down

an already complicated team because we couldn't move In response to the com- defences down.

He also rested Carles Puyol, Albert Reira and Raul Albiol, with Carlos Marchena, Gerard Pique, Juan Manuel Mata and Santi Cazorla in the starting 11.

Del Bosque was forced to start without

Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas who limped out

of training on Tuesday after a strong tackle by

Liverpool midfielder Xabi Alonso.

Milutinovic also rested several players with his focus on their last match of the group stages against New Zealand, which he believes they can win.

Compared to their 5-0 thrashing of New Zealand on Sunday, this was a much tougher test for Spain.

It took them eight minutes to unleash their first shot when Cazorla's left foot strike was easily gathered by goalkeeper Mohammed Kassid. Pique's glancing header went close on 15

minutes and Torres, Spain's hat-trick hero against New Zealand, almost got on the end of a looping Xavi through ball minutes later. Spain's best chance came midway through the half when Cazorla fired a cross in from the

right to find an unmarked Villa whose left-foot volley whistled past the post. Spain were threatening a goal but a composed Iraq held tight, getting bodies behind the

ball effectively and they went to the break all But it wasn't easy against Iraq, who played square. The European champions upped the tempo after the restart and Villa should have buried a golden opportunity eight minutes into the half when he fired a close range header straight at

> the goalkeeper. But he made no mistake a minute later when he got on the end of a Joan Capdevila cross and angled his header into the right-hand corner to

break the deadlock. It fired up Spain with Alonso, Torres and Mata all going close but Iraq never gave up, fighting bravely to the bitter end but unable to

treated.



more of the same AFP, Bloemfontein Liverpool's Xabi Alonso says now that Spain are one of the

> best teams in the world they are going to come across plenty more sides employing negative tactics to keep them at bay. Iraq, with wily tactician Bora Milutinovic in charge, were the latest to do so on Wednesday evening, playing with five men at the back to keep out the dangerous strike force of David

It was largely successful with "The pitch was horrible," the European champions' natural attacking flair stifled until Villa got the vital breakthrough in the 54th minute to send his team into the semifinals of the Confederations

> training on teammate Cesc Fabregas forced the Arsenal captain to miss Wednesday's game, said he expected more of the same in future. "It was really tough to get through that five man defence,'

Alonso, whose tackle in

said Alonso, who has been a target of Real Madrid but now appears likely to stay at Anfield. "One of our best chances was to shoot from outside the box, but even that didn't work

"We did enough, though, for the win and I'm certain it won't be the last time we face a

"But we should know how to play these type of opponents. We should know how to find a way to break these

ments, the Venue Manager for the stadium, Fithiwe Ngwenya, said there was nothing special about the

way the pitch had been

"We haven't received any official complaints," he said. "There is continuous work being done on the stadium field, which is in good shape.

We are watering it as usual. "I think the pitch is up to standards. If not, FIFA would not let them play there," he said before refusing to comment on whether there could be potential questions of home advantage raised ahead of Spain's match with the host nation South Africa

on Saturday. On Thursday, more Spanish players registered their concerns.

"The pitch was definitely too dry, and it stopped us from playing like we did before," said Juan Manuel Mata, who earned his second cap against the Iraqis.

Busquets said the pitch was a problem but was less severe in his criticism.

Fellow midfielder Sergio

"The grass in the first match was better and faster for sure," he said. "But really it's not that important. It's a little problem in the end."

If Spain win Group A, which they will if they avoid defeat against Bafana Bafana, they will stay in Bloemfontein for the semifinal next Wednesday against the second place finisher in Group B.

Villa's mind made up on transfer

PHOTO: AFP

AFP, Bloemfontein

Spain striker David Villa says he has made up his mind on which club he will move to, but refused to say who it was.

The Valancia star said his agent was working on the details.

"I only have one decision.

My agent already knows what that is and he is working towards it. I am relaxed here," he told reporters here at the Confederations Cup. The 27-year-old, who scored the goal that helped

Wednesday, has been linked with Real Madrid, Barcelona and Manchester United. "There is no deadline on the subject, and I really do not have any more details as this

Spain beat Iraq 1-0 on

whole thing is not totally dependent on me," he added. Spanish media reported this week that Barcelona had tabled a 35-million-euro bid

for the player. Real Madrid, who have already bought superstars Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo this month, had been chasing Villa but were reported to have been put off by a 42-millioneuro asking price.

Manchester United have

been linked to him but he has

said he would go to the English Premier League only if he could hook up with national teammate Fernando Torres at Liverpool, who have shown little interest so far. Villa has been an integral member of the Spain team

that hasn't lost since

November 2006 and is also

only one match away from

equalling Brazil's record 35-

match unbeaten run. Juninho signs with Al-Garrafa

AFP, Doha

Lyon's long-serving Brazilian playmaker Juninho has signed a two-year deal with Qatari champions Al-Garrafa for a fee believed to be in the region of 2.5 million euros, a record in the Gulf state's championship.

late Wednesday and said he was looking forward to his new adventure with the Dohabased club after having "spent the best years of my life in Lyon. The Brazilian scored 100 goals in eight seasons with the

Juninho, 34, inked the deal

ration behind Lyon's seven titles, including last year's domestic double, after joining from Vasco da Gama in 2001. When he announced he was leaving Lyon at the end of

French club and was the inspi-

last season, the club described it as the end of an era. The 44-times capped

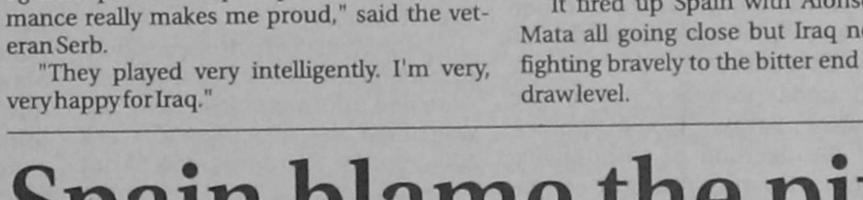
Brazilian reached three Champions League quarterfinals with Lyon and was their leading scorer in the competition with 18 goals.

Historically the Qatar championship has been a retirement location for a number of high-profile footballers, including Brazilian Romario, the Argentine Gabriel Batistuta and Frenchmen Marcel Desailly. and Frank Leboeuf.



PHOTO: AFP

South African Bernard Parker (R) celebrates with teammate Kagisho Dikgacoi after scoring his second against New Zealand during their Confederations Cup match at the Royal Bafokeng Stadium in Rustenburg on Wednesday.



Spanish striker David Villa (L) signs an autograph in Bloemfontein on Thursday.

A rampant Spain remain on

track to equal Brazil's record

unbeaten streak after

extending their own

unbeaten run to 34 games by

beating Iraq 1-0 at the

A goal by Valencia striker

Confederations Cup.

David Villa, at the centre of transfer speculation

with Manchester United and Barcelona report-

edly interested, was enough to break down a

the European champions even closer to

equalling the 35-match unbeaten run by

books by matching the 14 straight victories held

It put them into the semi-finals and moved

It also ensured their place in the record

In the semis Spain will either play Italy, or

Coach Vicente del Bosque, who was won all

12 matches since he has been in charge, said he

was proud to be working with such a talented

group of players, led by the likes of Villa and his

records and creating new runs by the day," he

an effective defensive game with five men at the

rhythm but we got the goal and it took us to the

semi-finals which was the main goal," added

Milutinovic said it was a sweet defeat.

Despite losing, wily Iraq coach Bora

"It was a dream for my players to play

against Spain and to put up that sort of perfor-

"It was really tough and hard to find our

"I'm very happy that this group is breaking

"Villa and Torres could play in any team in

Rampant Matadors