

Slovenia rejoice

AFP, Ljubljana

Minnows Slovenia will leave for the World Cup in South Africa with clean boots after Prime Minister Borut Pahor was forced to eat his words and get polishing following his country's play-off victory over Russia.

The Slovenians pulled off a 1-0 win over Russia on Wednesday and qualified on the away goals rule after the aggregate score of 2-2, playing an attacking gameplan that had commentators purring.

"Irrespective of the shortfall in youth and experience the Slovenian national football team very quickly understood the legality of modern football at the highest level, and played aggressive soccer, which attracts viewers," said Slovenian daily newspaper Dnevnik.

"This is no longer a defensive posture waiting for the counterattack."

The newspaper's front page headlined with "To Africa with clean shoes", in reference to Prime Minister Pahor's promise to the team that he would polish their boots if they won.

Pahor dutifully carried out his task immediately after the game, the paper reported.

"Superb performance (in the Maribor stadium of) Ljudskivrt.

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A STUNNING UPSET: Slovenia players are ecstatic after their 2010 World Cup qualifying win over Russia in Maribor on Wednesday. Slovenia won 1-0 to book a ticket to South Africa.

Russians left shocked

AFP, Moscow

Russian press and fans were left shocked after the national side's defeat to Slovenia in the return play-off match left them out of next year's World Cup.

Russia suffered a 1-0 defeat in Maribor on Wednesday for an aggregate 2-2 score but failing to qualify on the away goals rule.

"Suicide," headlined sports daily Sport Express, blaming the players for a string of inexplicable mistakes and lack of concentration in both play-off matches.

Another sports daily Soviet Sport also voiced sadness at the team's weak-willed showing in the play-offs, saying that its poor performance at the end of a qualifying campaign has become a dismal tradition.

"We returned to the point where we started," the newspaper said. "Our team looked weak and sickly in Maribor, exactly like it looked at the end of the Euro 2008 campaign against Israel and Andorra."

The press also speculated that the Russian team's failure may see Guus Hiddink pulling out of a possible contract extension with Russian Football Union (RFU).

Hiddink, who refused to attend the post-match news conference in Maribor, told the Russian press that he still had some time to finalise the decision about a possible extension to his stay in Russia.

"The RFU asked me to extend my contract ahead of October's match with Germany," Hiddink said. "I still have time to weigh all of the pros and cons as my deal expires in the summer."

"I'm upset with our failure," he added. "Slovenia's goal in Moscow was the key moment."

The Dutchman added that there was a question mark over the decision by Norwegian referee Terje Hauge to send Russia's forward Alexander Kerzhakov off.

"I did not see that episode but Alexander (Kerzhakov) told me that Slovenian goalkeeper Handanovic provoked him. I believe my players."

'Henry's hand of God'

AFP, Paris



A controversial handball by captain Thierry Henry helped France scramble away from the edge of the abyss and into the World Cup finals, French newspapers acknowledged Thursday.

Henry admitted after Wednesday's match against Ireland that the ball had struck his hand before he crossed for William Gallas to head home an extra-time goal which levelled the score at 1-1 on the night and sent France to South Africa 2-1 on aggregate.

"Miraculously saved from the edge of the abyss," said sports daily L'Equipe, the front page of which showed a clear photo of Henry handling the ball under the headline "The hand of God".

France will take part in the World Cup finals in South Africa next year, "it added.

"To get there, they held Ireland to a 1-1 draw after extra-time thanks to a William Gallas goal, preceded by a blatant Thierry Henry handball

which the referee missed."

L'Equipe was damning in its critique of the French players, only goalkeeper Hugo Lloris and Gallas emerging with any credit.

"The evening was incredible, incredibly bad for the French team for a long time," said the paper.

French Sports Minister Roselyne Bachelot called on France coach Raymond Domenech and his players to "rally" themselves.

"First of all, we qualified but now everything's left to do: to build a real team and to develop a real gameplan," Bachelot told French radio on Thursday.

"My feelings are split between what I'd call a great relief and an enormous worry," she added.

"We had a France team that was absolutely asphyxiated, which managed to get a draw due to a terrible refereeing error."

France had put in an "altogether insufficient" performance, she said, adding that the team wouldn't last long in South Africa should that type of play continue.

"I really want to tell him: Raymond, you must rally yourself and your players because we, the French, are most worried and upset."

Irish blasts Le Cheat

AFP, Dublin



Angry Irish commentators blasted Thierry Henry as "Le Cheat" Thursday after the French football skipper helped knock Ireland out of the World Cup with a clear handball.

The traditional luck of the Irish deserted its heartbroken team when Henry's hand seemed to control the ball before his angled pass let William Gallas head in a 103rd-minute goal, giving France a 2-1 aggregate win in the play-off.

"We were robbed" said the Irish Star. "Le Cheat" added the Irish Mirror, while the Irish Sun splashed with "Henry, You Bastille" and the "Hand of the Frog" -- a play on Maradona's 1986 "Hand of God" goal over England.

A Facebook page entitled "We Irish hate Thierry Henry (the cheat)" also drew hundreds of comments -- some of them unprintable -- including a call for an Irish boycott on French goods.

"I would say croissant sales will slump today," said one contributor to the social networking site.

Irish football veteran David O'Leary said Henry handled the ball twice. "He touched it the first time to stop the ball going out of play and the second time he adjusted the ball so he

could knock it across for the goal."

But O'Leary, who played for Ireland in the 1990 World Cup, refused to blame the referee, saying he had had an otherwise "excellent" game in Paris Wednesday night, but on the Henry incident, he had made "a scandalous decision".

"Thierry Henry is a lovely lad and he likes to be liked and he'll be in a very embarrassing position now because he wants to play the game in a certain way," he told BBC radio.

The Irish Times described the incident as "Heartbreak of Henry's hand of God, part II," saying Ireland's travelling army of fans "fell to the ground, inconsolable."

The Irish Independent said the team was "cheated" out of the World Cup finals.

"Armed robbery" its headline says, describing it as a "Massive injustice for boys in green as referee's howler sends French to South Africa".

"Daylight Robbery" says the Irish Examiner, "Henry's handball breaks Irish hearts".

In an editorial the Examiner says the "travesty" demonstrated again the need to use video technology for disputed incidents in matches.

Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen issued a statement congratulating the national team on its "courageous performance," but made no mention of the handball controversy.

He said the team's efforts kept the nation enthralled for 120 minutes and they made a "heroic effort" to qualify.

Dzeko eyes Milan move

AFP, Berlin

Hot-shot striker Edin Dzeko admitted Wednesday it would fulfil a lifelong dream if he switched to Italian giants AC Milan next summer as he eyes a possible move away from German champions Wolfsburg.

The 23-year-old helped Wolfsburg win the German league title last season with 26 goals, including three hat-tricks, and in August he signed a four-year contract which has a buy-out clause.

But the Bosnia and Herzegovina star is eyeing a move to the Italian league.

"Everyone knows that Milan is my dream club," said Dzeko, who is contracted with Wolfsburg until 2013. "I hope I can play there next season."

The striker's market value is around 30 million euros (44 million US dollars) and he was heavily courted by Milan at the end of last season.

Uruguay make it

AFP, Montevideo

Uruguay finished the job Wednesday, qualifying for the 2010 World Cup with a 1-1 draw against Costa Rica.

The South American side had gained the upper hand in their play-off against North and Central America's Costa Rica with a 1-0 victory at San Jose on Saturday and duly wrapped up the 32nd and final spot in the 2010 finals in South Africa.

Their victory on a 2-1 aggregate sends the Uruguayans back to the World Cup finals for the first time since 2002 -- where they will seek to add to the titles they won in 1930 and 1950.

Substitute Sebastian Abreu came on for Uruguay in the 65th minute and immediately made his presence felt.

The Greece-based striker headed home a goal off a ball from Andres Scotti in the 70th minute to open the scoring.

Costa Rica responded just four minutes later as Walter Centeno scored.

The crowd of 18,000 at Estadio Centenario had an agonizing wait through seven minutes of stoppage time, after the match was halted for five minutes when Costa Rica substitutes got embroiled in a sideline scuffle with some television reporters with 10 minutes remaining.

When play had resumed, Costa Rica's Alvaro Saborio threatened in the penalty area, but his shot was wide of Fernando Muslera's goal and time ran out for the Central Americans.

Costa Rica miss out on the finals for the first time since 1998 -- a tough end to a campaign that saw them lead the final round of the Champions League semi-final defeat to Manchester United in 2008.

'Ref succumbs to pressure'

AFP, London

The referee who mistakenly allowed the goal that sent France to the World Cup succumbed to pressure created by FIFA, Ireland's assistant manager Liam Brady claimed on Thursday.

As the recriminations over Thierry Henry's handball in the build up to the crucial goal intensified, Brady said world football's governing body had made clear its desire for France to reach the finals by belatedly deciding to seed the draw for the play-offs.

That ensured that France could not be drawn against either Russia or Portugal and, according to Brady, created an atmosphere that ultimately influenced Swedish referee Martin Hansson's handling of Wednesday's play-off second leg in Paris.

Speaking to BBC Radio, Brady said: "I wouldn't blame Thierry Henry for what went on. I would maybe look at what happened three months before and the fact that these seedings for the play-offs were made to favour the bigger teams. I would ask why that went on."

"The pressure on referees is enormous then. The pressure is too much to bear and I thought the referee up until then had refereed the match in fine fashion, but he succumbed under pressure."

Brady added: "I asked Thierry Henry after the game and he said 'I handled it but I didn't mean it.' When you look at the film I think he kept the ball in play and he meant it. I wouldn't go down the road of (calling it) cheating, the players seek every advantage they can."

"But I would ask FIFA, 'Do we want to play the match again?' We would go to Paris and play again. I don't think it would come to that but we would be willing to go to Paris, on their home ground, and have a fair winner."

IN BRIEF

Santon needs knee surgery

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan full-back Davide Santon will undergo knee surgery after being injured in Tuesday's Italy Under-21 encounter in Luxembourg.

After undergoing tests back at Inter, the club announced on its website that he had suffered a slight tear in his knee and would need an operation.

Milito back in action

AFP, Madrid

Argentine defender Gabriel Milito returned to action after an 18-month injury lay-off on Wednesday as Barcelona defeated Bolivar CF of Bolivia 4-1 in a friendly match.

"It's a very special day for me," said the 29-year-old Milito, who suffered knee ligament damage in the Champions League semi-final defeat to Manchester United in 2008.

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Algerians explode with joy

AFP, Algiers

In France, celebrations were marred by violence in some areas, with cars set alight and police firing tear gas.

Hundreds of thousands of people, young and old, flooded into the streets in towns and villages across Algeria, celebrating with flags, fireworks and car horns.

Even a few police officers lost their cool, sounding their sirens to join in the rapture at the triumph of "les Verts" -- Algeria's green-shirted side who beat Egypt 1-0 in the do-or-die play-off in Khartoum.

Around Algiers, fans shouted "Thank you, les

Vert", "One, two, three, viva Algeria" and "We're going to the World Cup".

Packed into cars and running through the crowded streets, young men and women -- many wrapped in the green and white national flag -- beamed with happiness.

"It's too much, they've given us everything," said Naima, 18, laughing and crying at once.

"Do you have any idea what the tension was like? We've shown our support for the team since they were beaten in Cairo on Saturday and now we've done it. The dream has come true!" one of her friends



An Algerian fan waves the national flag as supporters gather near the Arc de Triomphe on the Champs-Elysees Avenue in Paris to celebrate their team's victory over Egypt in the 2010 World Cup qualifier on Wednesday.

Spain soar past Austria

Germany struggle

Football

AFP, Paris

Spain underscored their status as World Cup favourites on Wednesday by swatting Austria 5-1 away in an international friendly encounter, David Villa twice on target.

But three-times winners Germany, who beat Spain in the final of Euro 2008, had to rely on a last-gasp goal from Lukas Podolski to secure a 2-2 home draw with Ivory Coast.

Reigning world champions Italy saw a second string side come through 1-0 at home to a Sweden team missing star player Zlatan Ibrahimovic with central defender Giorgio Chiellini netting in Cesena.

While Portugal were coming through their playoff match against Bosnia to sneak through the backdoor into the World Cup finals the team that beat them to automatic qualification, Denmark, had to come from a goal down to beat the United States 3-1 at Aarhus.

Two other qualifiers, Holland and Paraguay, part goalless in the Netherlands while Serbia ended a 27-match unbeaten South Korea run with striker Nikola Zigic on target with the only goal in their game at Fulham's Craven Cottage.

African Nations Cup hosts Angola meanly parted 0-0 with a Ghana side missing key players Michael Essien, Sulley Muntari and Asamoah Gyan.

Spain endured a tough opening period at the Ernst Happel stadium in Vienna after Jakob

Jantscher netted for the Austrians.

But inside three minutes Cesc Fabregas made things all-square and then Villa swooped on 21 minutes and again on the stroke of half-time to make it 3-1 and restore order for the furia roja, the Austrians caving in after the 27th-minute dismissal of Yasin Pehlivan.

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