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SOUTH AFRICA 2010

FIFA WORLD CUP

1 DAY TO GO

Spain has it all

AFP, Johannesburg

Spanish football is riding the crest of a wave following Spain's Euro 2008 victory and the record-breaking achievements of Barcelona in 2009, and La Roja are the favourites for the World Cup.

Having been drawn alongside Honduras, Chile and Switzerland in Group H, they will expect to make the last 16, where Brazil, Portugal and Ivory Coast are all potential opponents if they top their group.

Their best previous performance was a fourth-place finish in 1950 but in players like goalkeeper Iker Casillas, midfield magicians Xavi and Andres Iniesta and lethal strikers David Villa and Fernando Torres they possess the kind of quality that emerges only once in a generation.

Spain qualified with a flawless record, winning all 10 matches in their European qualifying group, but coach Vicente Del Bosque feels that will count for nothing when the tournament gets under way.

"We don't know, destiny is impossible to predict," he said.

"The key will be to prepare as well as we possibly can for the battle ahead, because we'll come up against very, very strong opponents. This includes those teams who aren't going into the finals among the favourites."

Spain will go into the tournament at full strength, after Liverpool striker Torres showed he has regained his customary sharpness following knee surgery in April with a neatly taken goal in a 6-0 romp against Poland in Murcia on Tuesday.

"We can travel to South Africa in good spirits now," Del Bosque said.

Honduras face a daunting task in just their second World Cup appearance they went out in the first round in 1982.

Rafael Callejas, head of the country's football federation, said the team ranked 38th in the world faced an intense battle to match the fitness levels of their opponents.

"We face very high-level teams in Spain, Switzerland and Chile," he said. "Honduras must prepare itself very well."

Fellow Hispanophones Chile, ranked 18th by FIFA, return to

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GOD MUST BE CRAZY: Argentina players Sergio Aguero, Walter Samuel, Jonas Gutierrez and coach Diego Maradona dodge balls shot at them after the group lost a short match in training at the University of Pretoria High Performance Centre base on Tuesday. Maradona ordered the winners to shoot at them as they lined up in front of goal.

PHOTO: AFP

Tough talking Domenech

AP, Knysna

France coach Raymond Domenech said his players will have no excuses if they fail at the World Cup because of the ideal preparation they have enjoyed.

The French squad has a secluded training area in Knysna and stays in a luxurious hotel overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Ahead of Friday's opening World Cup group game against Uruguay, Domenech said the players have to respond when you "take all their excuses away" and make them understand there is no room for complacency.

"The training ground is almost idyllic," Domenech said in a video posted on the French football federation's website. "They are exceptional conditions to train in. The players are aware of the importance and impact the World Cup will have and what is expected of them."

Domenech, who has not spoken to reporters since arriving in South Africa, has told the players that "it's your performance that counts now. You can never say anything about the rest."

The team was recently criticised by French sports

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And Mandela is coming too

AFP, Johannesburg

As South Africa counts down the final days to Friday's World Cup kick-off, Nelson Mandela's name is everywhere.

The country spent a tense week waiting for definitive word on whether the former president, who is increasingly frail at 91, would attend the opening ceremony.

After days of conflicting statements from family and organisers, the tournament got the ultimate boost Tuesday with news from his family that he would attend if only for a short while.

Preparations for the World Cup began in earnest only after his presidency and were led largely by others.

But for South Africans, the World Cup bears the indelible imprint of Mandela's legacy.

"It is through his tireless efforts to achieve reconciliation and to build a thriving rainbow nation that the world bestowed South Africa with this honour of hosting the games," President Jacob Zuma said Sunday.

"He also worked hard personally to bring us to this glorious moment."

Mandela's involvement proved critical at key moments in South Africa's campaign to win the games.

In April 2004, the month before world football governing body FIFA was due to announce the 2010 World Cup host, Mandela visited Trinidad and Tobago to meet Jack Warner, the president of the region's football association and a key member of FIFA's executive committee.

"Jack bluntly told us that if we wanted his vote, we must bring Mandela to the Caribbean," said Irvin Khoza, chair of South Africa's World Cup organising committee.

Mandela was 85 at the time, and his doctor had instructed him not to travel.

But the Nobel Peace Prize winner made the trip anyway, winning Warner's crucial support.

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WORLD CUP POLL

Which major team you think will be the first casualty of the World Cup?

France	58.7%
Italy	18.5%
Portugal	15.2%

TOTAL VOTES: 92

TODAY'S POLL

Do you think Argentina are relying too much on Lionel Messi?

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G is Group of death

AFP, Johannesburg

A high-profile casualty is inevitable in the World Cup's Group G with Brazil, Portugal and Ivory Coast fighting for two places while North Korea concentrate on damage limitation.

Brazil have lifted the trophy that symbolises global football supremacy a record five times, Portugal finished fourth at the last tournament in 2006 and many pundits consider Ivory Coast the best African bet for glory.

And while North Korea are universally regarded as 'cannon fodder', none of the 32 challengers has prepared more thoroughly than the little-known squad from the reclusive nation.

Superstars abound in the first-round 'Group of Death' as Brazil boast Real Madrid midfielder Kaka, while Portugal are inspired by his club teammate Cristiano Ronaldo.

The Ivory Coast's Didier Drogba ranks alongside them in potential impact but the striker's chances of playing in the first World Cup on African soil hang in the balance after an operation on a broken arm.

Portugal also suffered an injury blow when in-form Manchester United winger Nani was ruled out of the tournament on Tuesday after severely bruising his collarbone in training.

Brazil, the only country to compete at all 19 previous tournaments, are favoured to finish first and set up a possible last-16 showdown with fellow South Americans Chile.

And the opening Group G clash on Tuesday between Ivory Coast and Portugal in Port Elizabeth could determine who else progresses with European champions Spain the probable second-round opponents for the second-placed finisher.

North Korea will defend en masse and com-

pete like tigers, but lack the firepower to emulate their countrymen of 1966, who defeated Italy in Middlesbrough to cause one of the great World Cup shocks.

Coach Dunga has assembled a tactically astute squad that espouses the work ethic and plays as a team with no place for the prima-donna factor that cost Brazil dearly in the past.

Dunga left out Ronaldinho, but Kaka is rounding into form after a poor debut season in Madrid.

Many consider Julio Cesar of Inter Milan the best goalkeeper in the world, Lucio and Juan form a solid central defence barrier, Gilberto Silva does the midfield graft and Luis Fabiano has few peers as a goal poacher.

Brazil also know South Africa well as they return with the stars who won the Confederations Cup last June, when they came from two goals behind to pip the United States 3-2 in Johannesburg.

Portugal needed a playoff against Bosnia-Herzegovina to reach South Africa after a qualifying campaign in which midfielder-cum-striker Ronaldo failed to score in seven matches before being sidelined by injury.

Where to play the 'golden boy' will occupy much of coach Carlos Queiroz's time with the options facing the former assistant to Alex Ferguson at Manchester United including using him in a wide or central midfield role or as a lone striker.

Portugal breezed through a 3-0 warm-up victory over Mozambique Tuesday, but the match was overshadowed by the loss of Nani following an injury in training.

Queiroz though was pleased to see Real Madrid defensive midfielder Pepe back in action after six months out with a knee injury.

"It's fantastic. With the help of Real Madrid's doctors, the Portuguese federation and the technical staff of the national team, we have

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Uzbek ref not nervous

AFP, Johannesburg

Uzbek referee Ravshan Irmatov insists he is not nervous as the clock ticks down to the biggest game of his career.

Irmatov has been selected to officiate the opening match of the World Cup on Friday between hosts South Africa and Mexico - only the second time that an Asian Football Confederation ref has been picked for such a job.

An international referee for eight seasons, he was Asia's top man in the middle in both 2008 and 2009 and has previously taken charge of games at Under-17 World Cups and was also on duty at the 2008 Club World Cup in Japan.

"We are not refereeing for the first time. That's why we are used to this atmosphere. We go and just do our jobs. Nothing extraordinary," the 32-year-old said on the Asian Football Confederation website.

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Hot Chile

AFP, Kanyamazane

Chile defeated New Zealand 2-0 in a World Cup build-up match here on Wednesday.

Goals from Gonzalo Fierro after 68 minutes and Estedan Parades four minutes later gave the South Americans victory in a match opposing two World Cup qualifiers.

Ashraful returns

Bangladesh name Asia Cup squad



SPORTS REPORTER

Mohammad Ashraful returned to the one-day squad despite his poor form when the national selectors announced a 15-member team for the Asia Cup, which will kick off in Sri Lanka on June 15.

Ashraful was ignored for the home series against England due to an extended lean patch but was recalled for the Twenty20 World Cup and the two-match Test series in England and there was hardly any indication that the right-hander was back to his form.

"Ashraful is one of our key performers in

limited overs cricket. He might not have scored big runs but he looked to get back his rhythm a little bit as he played a good innings in the Twenty20 World Cup and also scored some runs in the practice matches in England," defended chief selector Rafiqul Alam.

The Rafiqul Alam-led selection panel didn't make any massive changes in the team as only Jahurul Islam was drafted in the one-day side while left-arm pacer Syed Rasel was also recalled.

Middle-order batsman Aftab Ahmed was the only notable omission from the team.

"Chopping and changing is not good for a young team and that's why we hardly brought changes in the team. Aftab was dropped

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