



(L) Two Indian fans turn up at the ground sporting T-shirts featuring their favourite players, and (R) India's master batsman Sachin Tendulkar gives them cause for cheer as he hits one through the covers during the World Cup semifinal against Pakistan at the Punjab Cricket Association Stadium in Mohali yesterday.



PHOTOS:
AFP

Glaxose MOMENT OF THE DAY

Pakistanis gather around screens

AFP, Islamabad

Millions of Pakistanis gathered on Wednesday around giant screens set up on streets and in playgrounds across the country to witness the World Cup semifinal thriller with rival India.

The government declared a half-day holiday in offices and schools to enable the cricket-mad population to enjoy a match dubbed the "clash of titans".

Special prayers were offered in mosques and at homes across the country and people recited verses from the Koran praying to Allah to guide the Pakistani team to the victory.

Motorists listened to the commentary on their car radios and shouted out the latest score to passers-by at a busy intersection in Islamabad.

Young people were seen wearing the green T-shirts of the Pakistani squad, their faces painted in the nation's green and white, in northwestern city of Peshawar while large national flags were hoisted on buildings, houses and cars.

In the southern port city of Karachi there was a carnival atmosphere on the streets. Residents blocked many roads and set up giant screens to watch the live broadcast from the Indian town of Mohali.

BARE ALL FOR INDIA

Women in India are encouraged to dress modestly at all times, but a brasher side to modern life has been exposed after a popular model vowed to strip naked if the nation wins the cricket World Cup.

Poonam Pandey, 20, who features in a best-selling Indian swimwear calendar, said she wanted to provide an incentive to players by promising them she would bare all -- though whether her offer will be welcomed is not known.

"I'm a cricket fanatic and I'm a diehard supporter of my nation. India needs a lot of support and this is my way of supporting the team," she told several newspapers on Wednesday.

Asked by reporters if she was pulling a publicity stunt, she replied: "Absolutely not. I'm confident of my body and I'm doing this to excite our boys to play better."

Pandey received widespread media attention for her pledge, with the Times of India illustrating its story with a colour photograph of her wearing a skimpy bikini.

"Pray for today's match that the boys play

well and make us proud," she said on her Twitter page ahead of India's crunch semifinal game against Pakistan.

BOLLYWOOD DESCENDS ON MOHALI

A bevy of Bollywood stars added a dash of glamour to Wednesday's high-octane World Cup semifinal clash between arch-rivals India and Pakistan.

Top actor Aamir Khan was flanked by his wife Kiran Rao in the VIP enclosure of the 30,000-seater Punjab Cricket Association Stadium, packed to capacity for the epic day-night clash.

Khan was joined by actors Vivek Oberoi, Rahul Bose and Dino Morea and popular Punjabi singer Daler Mehndi in the glass-enclosure.

"Billion Indian hearts beating for 11 boys in blue to make India proud," tweeted Oberoi.

Morea said he was enjoying the energy of fans. "Flight to Chandigarh packed with blues, people screaming, great energy. Chatter is interesting, everyone has an opinion on how India should play. Mad security, and great energy in Mohali," he wrote on Twitter.

GUNS POLISHED FOR PARTYYING

Pakistani tribesmen were cleaning their guns and collecting explosives for celebratory fire Wednesday to prepare for Pakistan beating India in the cricket World Cup semifinal.

The North Waziristan region near the Afghan border ground to a halt like cities and towns across the country. Awash with light and heavy weapons, the tribal belt -- described by Washington as the most dangerous place in the world -- is cricket-crazy like rest of Pakistan.

Markets, schools and offices were closed in the region's main town Miranshah and many made special arrangements to watch the much-hyped match on large screens.

Tribesmen who consider the country's honour is at stake were seen cleaning their weapons for aerial firing should Pakistan win, witnesses said.

"I am going to sacrifice this for the Pakistan team," tribesman Hayatullah Jan told AFP as he dragged a sheep.

"India is our traditional rival, we should beat it on every front. In today's match also I want to see them humbled by the Pakistan side," said Shumal Khan.

Tribal elder Malik Amir Khan said he intended to invite the Pakistan team to

Cricket diplomacy working fine

AFP, Mohali



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met with his Pakistani counterpart Yousuf Raza Gilani on Wednesday to watch the cricket World Cup semifinal between their rival countries.

The two men were seated in the VIP box for the national anthems before heading on to the pitch at the Mohali stadium in northwest India to shake hands with players from both sides.

The last time a top Pakistani leader visited India was in 2001, when the then president, military ruler Pervez Musharraf, came to India for a landmark summit that ended in acrimony.

Singh invited Gilani to watch the match with him last week in a move dubbed "cricket diplomacy."

It is an attempt to warm up relations at a time when the countries are tentatively getting their peace process back on track.

India broke off official contacts with Islamabad in 2008 after the Mumbai attacks, which India blamed on Pakistani militants who wrought carnage in the city over three days, killing 166 people.

MOHALI MASALA

Dutch win a thriller

AFP, Paris



Defending champions Spain beat Lithuania 3-1 on Tuesday to remain unbeaten in their Euro 2012 qualifying campaign, while the Netherlands edged Hungary in an eight-goal thriller in Amsterdam.

Spain now have a six-point lead in Group I, after seeing off Lithuania on a wretchedly bare pitch in Kaunas that had prompted calls for the game to be postponed.

"It was important to win today despite the lamentable state of the pitch," Spain midfielder Xavi told Telecinco.

"It's just sand, it's sad to see a pitch like that. You can't play football here. But we're happy. We have a foot and a half in the Euro."

Xavi gave the visitors a 20th-minute lead with a deflected shot but Marius Stankevicius, who plays for Spanish club Valencia, drew Lithuania level in the 57th minute with a sensational low drive from 30 yards.

The world and European champions re-established their advantage just eight minutes later, however, when defender Tadas Kijanskas put through his own goal under pressure from Fernando Llorente.

Stankevicius's Valencia team-mate Juan Manuel Mata finished a slick move to make it 3-1 with seven minutes to play, as Spain recorded their fifth straight victory in the qualifying tournament.

In the evening's other Group I match, the Czech Republic galvanised their grip on second place by winning 2-0 at home to bottom side Liechtenstein.

Holland, beaten 1-0 by Spain in last year's World Cup final in South Africa, needed a late Dirk Kuyt brace to see off Hungary 5-3 in a

memorable encounter at the Amsterdam Arena.

Hungary were gunning for revenge after being thrashed 4-0 by the Dutch last Friday but they fell behind to a 13th-minute strike by Robin van Persie.

The score remained unchanged until half-time but Bari striker Gergely Rudolf drew the visitors level within one minute of kick-off in the second half before a sharp volley from Zoltan Gera nudged Hungary ahead.

Wesley Sneijder drew Holland level on the hour and Ruud van Nistelrooy restored their advantage in the 72nd minute, only for Gera to bring Hungary level again just three minutes later.

Kuyt got on the score-sheet for the first time three minutes after Gera's equaliser and then killed off the game -- and a frantic period of scoring -- with his second and the Netherlands' fifth in the 81st minute.

Like Spain, Holland are yet to drop points in six games in Group E and ended the night nine points clear of Sweden, who beat Moldova 2-1 and have two games in hand.

Hungary are third, level on points with Sweden, but having played two games more.

Elsewhere, Belgium closed to within five points of Group A leaders Germany by beating Azerbaijan 4-1 in Brussels.

Guus Hiddink's Turkey defeated Austria 2-0 and are now a point behind the Belgians in third place with a game in hand.

In Group C, Serbia, Northern Ireland and Slovenia all failed to make up ground on leaders Italy.

An 84th-minute equaliser from Estonian attacking midfielder Konstantin Vassiljev saw Serbia held to a 1-1 draw in Tallinn, while Slovenia's trip to Northern Ireland ended in a goalless stalemate.

Italy are now five points clear of Serbia and Slovenia, with a game in hand.



Netherlands midfielder Ibrahim Afellay (R) slide-tackles Hungary forward Zoltan Gera during their Euro 2012 qualifier in Amsterdam on Tuesday.

PHOTO:
AFP

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION

Who has been the best performer in the World Cup's first round?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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National Cricket League
(Four-Day Match, Day-4)

Rajshahi v Dhaka at Narayanganj
Chittagong v Sylhet at BKSP