

Robson slates Capello

Manchester United legend Bryan Robson criticised Fabio Capello's handling of the England captaincy saga on Wednesday but said he supported the decision to reinstate John Terry. Robson, speaking at the Soccerex conference in Manchester, said Capello had blundered by failing to inform former captain Rio Ferdinand in person that he planned to restore the armband to Chelsea defender Terry. Manchester United player Ferdinand was known to be unhappy at the decision and the issue dominated the build-up to England's matches against Wales on Saturday and Ghana on Tuesday.

- AFP



SL ready for final

AFP, Mumbai



Sri Lanka's coach Trevor Bayliss says his team can defeat favourites India in Saturday's World Cup final despite injury worries to star bowler Muttiah Muralidaran.

The world record holder, suffering from hamstring and knee injuries, skipped practice on Thursday at the Wankhede Stadium, raising doubts of his availability for the title clash.

But Bayliss said the off-spinner, who turns 39 next month, was determined to take the field in his last international match.

"Chances are good that Murali will play," the coach said. "He completed 10 overs in the semifinal, and such is the character of the man that he will play even with discomfort."

Sri Lanka are also sweating over all-rounder Angelo Mathews, who picked up a side strain during the semifinal win over New Zealand in Colombo on Tuesday.

Veteran seamer Chaminda Vaas, 37, and off-spinner Suraj Randiv are being flown in as cover for the injured duo, but Bayliss confirmed Sri Lanka had not applied to the International Cricket Council for replacements.

"We have asked for them just to be on the safe side, but Muralidaran and Mathews will be given as long as possible to prove their fitness," the coach said.

Bayliss was confident Sri Lanka had a good chance to win their second World Cup title after 1996.

"We have played good cricket through the tournament and have done well against India in the past," he said.

"The pressure will be on India since they are playing at home, but we are familiar with the conditions in Mumbai."

While India will be playing at the refurbished 33,000-capacity Wankhede Stadium for the first time, Sri Lanka beat

SEE PAGE 17 COL 4



Sri Lanka captain Kumar Sangakkara stretches during practice at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday, ahead of tomorrow's World Cup final against India here.



PHOTO: AFP

Press go Blue crazy

AFP, New Delhi



Indian newspapers splashed the country's triumph over bitter rival Pakistan in the World Cup semifinals across the front pages Thursday, applauding the game as an "epic showdown."

"After this... the Cup's a bonus," trumpeted the tabloid Mail Today, referring to the first all-Asian World Cup final against Sri Lanka in Mumbai that will be played on Saturday.

"The epic showdown between the arch rivals lives up to its billing as the match of the World Cup," the newspaper said after delirious celebrations at the Punjab Cricket stadium in the northern Indian town of Mohali.

In a match watched on TV by millions of passionate fans in both countries, India eclipsed Pakistan by 29 runs in an intense match that assumed political as well as sporting significance.

The countries' prime ministers watched the game together and held talks at the ground on improving their troubled cross-border relationship.

"Goodbye Pak, hello Mumbai," said the Pioneer, hailing the "good cricket and even better camaraderie" of the game. Several of the newspapers printed stories and headlines in blue to match the Indian team's colours.

Pakistani media blamed butter-fingered fielding and poor batting for the team's defeat.

"Misbahul Haq, Pakistan's would-be champion, cast a tragic figure as his team's World Cup campaign ended in a suffocating defeat at the hands of India," leading English newspaper Dawn said.

It blamed dropped catches, scratchy shots and Misbah's

SEE PAGE 17 COL 1

India bathes in success

AFP, New Delhi



India on Thursday revelled in its sporting and diplomatic success after beating Pakistan in a cricket World Cup semifinal that also hosted leadership talks on better cross-border ties.

"After this... the Cup's a bonus," read the front page of the Mail Today, hailing an "epic showdown between arch rivals" as Indians looked forward to the final on Saturday against Sri Lanka in Mumbai.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's move to invite his Pakistani counterpart Yousuf Raza Gilani to watch the game with him in Mohali, northwest India, gave an added frisson of historical significance to Wednesday's day-night match.

The two nuclear-armed nations have a bitter record of war and disagreement since British rule of the subcontinent ended in 1947, and Gilani's visit was the first by a Pakistani leader to neighbouring India in 10 years.

"Cricket has been a uniting factor, it has brought our two prime ministers together and I dare say that's a very good begin-

ning," Singh said, thanking Gilani for accepting his invitation.

"The message from Mohali is that the people of India and Pakistan want to live in peace," Singh added after the game was played in a joyous atmosphere that contrasted with the countries'



A car full of Indian fans paint Mumbai red in celebration of their team's victory in the World Cup semifinal against Pakistan on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

ministers held a short dinner meeting in the middle of the Pakistan innings before returning to their seats to watch the final overs.

"Today's match brought the peoples and leadership of the two countries together," Gilani said. "This is the positive outcome of today's semifinal."

Gilani, whose nation is struggling with militant unrest, political assassinations and a collapsing economy, said the match result was not the most important part of the day.

"Winning and losing is something that has its own place but this is a victory for cricket and the two countries," he told reporters.

Before the game, the two leaders stood side-by-side for the national anthems and then walked onto the pitch to shake hands with both sets of players.

Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India have fought three wars since the division of the subcontinent in 1947, and came to the brink of another conflict as recently as 2002.

The neighbouring nations both ground to a halt during the semifinal, with Pakistan declaring a half-day holiday and offices and shops across the region shutting early.



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