

Generous Croatia

AFP, Zagreb

Croatia's football squad have donated a quarter of their money earned for reaching the World Cup finals to victims of deadly floods that have devastated the Balkans.

Members of Bosnia-Herzegovina's World Cup squad, led by star striker Edin Dzeko, have also appealed for help for their stricken compatriots as they participate in a training camp near the disaster zone.

Croatia will take centre stage when they face hosts Brazil in the opening game of this year's World Cup in Sao Paulo on June 12.

But almost 50 people have died and about 150,000 have been forced from their homes because of floods in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia.

Croatia coach Niko Kovac and striker Ivica Olic visited flood-stricken areas around Zupanja in the east of the country on Tuesday, cancelling all engagements to see the area where 15,000 people have fled.

"If we fight in Brazil like these people here on the embankments and in flooded areas than we will be good," said the coach, who was visibly moved by the disaster.

"In this suffering I also see something nice, people who support each other."

Croatia's squad have agreed to donate about 130,000 euros (\$180,000), one quarter of the money they were given by the Croatian federation for reaching the finals in Brazil.

"I have spoken to the team captain, Darijo Srna, and we have decided that the players and the coaching staff will renounce a part of their World Cup play-off win bonus," said Kovac.

"These people are endangered and they have lost everything."



PHOTO: AFP

Germany forward Lukas Podolski (L) chats with teammate and midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger before the team's training session in Passeier yesterday.

REUTERS, Berlin



Germany midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger will be fully fit for next month's World Cup in Brazil, Germany's assistant coach Hansi Flick said on Thursday.

The holding midfielder, nicknamed the 'brain' by Germany coach Joachim Loew for his ability to orchestrate the team's quick passing game, did not train with the squad on the first full day of a train-

ing camp in the Italian Alps.

He is only gradually returning to full fitness following a knee inflammation which caused him to miss Bayern Munich's German Cup final win over Borussia Dortmund on Saturday, the latest in a succession of injuries this season.

"He has his programme and we have to see how he handles it," Flick told a news conference in northern Italy.

Schweinsteiger, key for Germany's flowing attacking game, is not the only injury concern with top striker Miroslav Klose also undergoing individual training to catch up

after missing much of the season.

First-choice keeper Manuel Neuer and captain Philipp Lahm are expected to join their teammates on Friday after undergoing intensive treatment in Munich for injuries picked up in the Cup final.

Neuer, who is wearing a sling following a shoulder injury, is expected to be fit for the tournament starting in June, although officials have put new Barcelona keeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen on standby.

"Manuel was treated for six hours yesterday," Flick said. "Marc has been informed. (goalkeeper coach) Andreas Koepke

phoned him and told him not to leave on holidays.

"But we all expect Manuel to be fully fit and play. We should not discuss too much about it. Manuel is the keeper we want at the World Cup."

Dortmund's Roman Weidenfeller and Hanover 96's Ron-Robert Zieler were the other two goalkeepers selected in Germany's provisional squad.

Germany play Cameroon and Armenia in friendlies before leaving for Brazil where they face Portugal, Ghana and the United States in Group G.

Mexico coach urges abstinence

AFP, Mexico City

Mexico manager Miguel Herrera wants his players to avoid sex during the World Cup in Brazil, joking it will be okay to look at but not touch bikini-clad women.

The fiery coach said he would not ban his 23 men from any hanky panky but that he would prefer they practice abstinence during the month-long tournament that kicks off on June 12.

"I am not thinking about prohibiting sex nor that they would have it," Herrera told a news conference Wednesday.

"I am thinking about football and I hope that the boys are thinking about football because nobody has died from practicing abstinence for 40 days," he said.

"Some people are virgins until marriage and they are 20 or 25 years old. So, please, nobody will die for 40 days."

Asked whether the rule applies to the coaching staff, Herrera said he would be too busy drawing tactics.

Can Europeans win in Brazil?

AFP, London



In seven attempts, no European country has ever won a World Cup in the Americas, but that statistic will come under serious threat at this year's tournament in Brazil.

While teams have traditionally struggled in tournaments on foreign continents, the sport's increasing globalisation and advances in technology mean that playing at home is no longer the advantage it once was.

From a purely sporting perspective, the 13 teams from the UEFA confederation who head to Brazil will do so at a time of clear European dominance.

Three of the four semifinalists at the 2010 World Cup were European and six of the last seven Club World Cups were won by European teams, with Brazilian side Corinthians' 2012 triumph over Chelsea the sole exception.

Meanwhile, although Argentine superstar Lionel Messi has dominated the FIFA Ballon d'Or in recent years, the last time another South American player finished on the podium was when Kaka received the award in 2007.

Messi is also an illustrative example of a South American player who has spent more time playing in Europe than on the continent where he was born.

The 26-year-old may be an extreme

case, having left his homeland for Barcelona at the age of just 13, but his experience reflects a wider trend.

Whereas 21 of the 22 players in the Argentine squad that triumphed on home soil at the 1978 World Cup played their football in their home country, only five of the 30 names in Alejandro Sabella's provisional squad for the 2014 tournament could say the same.

As England manager Roy Hodgson observed earlier this year, the mass exportation of South American players to Europe means that they may not feel much more at home playing in Brazil than their European counterparts.

"South American teams are exporting all their players to Europe, so there's a certain European-ness about even the South American teams these days," Hodgson told the FIFA website.

"The Brazil team will probably have very few players in it that are actually playing in Brazil. The Uruguayans and the Argentinians probably don't have many that are playing there."

Transportation is also a much less thorny factor than it was for the Europeans who travelled to the first World Cups to be held in South America -- in Uruguay in 1930, Brazil in 1950, and Chile in 1962.

Whereas the four European teams who contested the first World Cup in Uruguay had to cross the Atlantic by boat, many of the players competing in Brazil this year will arrive in executive

comfort aboard luxurious jets.

Warm-weather training will help the non-South American teams to adapt to Brazil's climatic conditions and while humidity will be an issue in several host cities, temperatures will largely be akin to a warm European summer.

Furthermore, European teams have already come close to enjoying success in previous World Cups in the Americas.

Czechoslovakia took the lead against hosts Brazil in the 1962 final, only to lose 3-1, and Argentina required an 84th-minute Jorge Burruchaga goal to see off West Germany in the 1986 final in Mexico.

Dutch midfielder Rob Rensenbrink, meanwhile, would have given the Netherlands the trophy in 1978 had his shot not hit the post in injury time of the final against hosts Argentina in Buenos Aires.

Instead the Argentines took the game to extra time before winning 3-1, leaving Rensenbrink to reflect: "If the trajectory of my shot had been five centimetres different, we would have been world champions."

The presence of figures from Argentina's military junta inside the Estadio Monumental helped to create an atmosphere that felt thick with intimidation for the Dutch players, but there again, Brazil will be different.

The European teams can expect to feel right at home.

England train in sweat vests

REUTERS, London

England's World Cup squad have been training in sweat vests in Portugal as coach Roy Hodgson prepares them for the heat they will encounter in their opening match against Italy in the Brazilian city of Manaus.

Experts from Loughborough University are also monitoring players at the base in Vale Do Lobo.

"It's about learning to be comfortable being uncomfortable," Hodgson told the BBC.

"We tested how much they sweat, how will they be able to recover and what can be done to help."

England's opening match in the northern Amazon city of Manaus is causing particular concern as heat and humidity levels are likely to be intense.

Temperatures at Vale Do Lobo are mild in comparison but players are wearing several levels of clothing, while special pads monitor how much they are sweating.

Indonesian keeper truly sorry

AFP, Jakarta



An Indonesian goalkeeper said Thursday he was "truly sorry" after a striker he kicked in the stomach during a match in one of the country's top leagues died.

Agus Rohman said he had received death threats after Akli Fairuz, 27, died, but insisted he was not solely to blame and suggested the player's medical treatment was inadequate.

Rohman told AFP that when he heard the news, he "couldn't stop crying."

"I have never in my life intended to hurt or kill my opponents."

"I regretted what happened, why did he have to die from my kick? I am truly sorry to Akli, to his family, to everyone," added the 34-year-old.

Fairuz's death, several days after the May 10 match, was a further blow to Indonesian football which has been beset by numerous problems in recent years, from leadership tussles to foreign players dying after complaining of going unpaid.

The incident happened during a match between Rohman's side, PSAP Sigli, and Fairuz's Persiraja Banda Aceh, in the city of Banda Aceh on western Sumatra island.

The clubs play in the Liga Indonesia Premier Division, the country's second-tier league.

Video footage showed Fairuz run into the box of the opposing team to take a shot after the ball rebounded off Rohman.

But the goalkeeper ran out and kicked him in the stomach as he took the shot, knocking him to the ground. Fairuz died on May 16 in hospital, with officials saying he suffered a ruptured intestine.

However Rohman insisted the kick was "not violent" and "unavoidable", and pointed out the striker continued to watch the game from the sidelines before later being taken to hospital.

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