



Rakib Hossain's (L) tears and the crouched figure of Tapu Barman says it all. Bangladesh were so close to ending 16-year-wait for a berth in SAFF Championship final, but eventually had to bow out in tragic fashion following a 1-1 draw against Nepal in their last group match last night.

Spot-kick shatters Bangladesh's dreams

ANISUR RAHMAN from Male

Anjan Bista's penalty, awarded by Uzbekistan referee Akhrol Riskullaev in a controversial fashion, in the dying minutes of the game broke the hearts of Bangladesh as Nepal came from behind to draw 1-1 in their final group fixture of the SAFF Championship at the National Football Stadium in Male yesterday.

The outcome also saw Nepal reach the final of the regional championship for the first time in its 28-year history.

Bangladesh players gathered around the Uzbek referee for about five minutes after his controversial decision. A spectator, disappointed with the decision that denied Bangladesh an entry into the competition's final for the first time in 16 years, stormed into the ground and the referee and his assistants needed police to escort them out of the ground.

Bangladesh were reduced to 10 men when goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico was given marching orders in the 78th minute after he had handled the ball outside the box. Nepal, who were a goal down at that point, put pressure on Bangladesh for an equaliser.

A Nepalese forward, who tried to connect Maish Dangi's cross but went down following the slightest of touches from Sudd Uddin inside the box, prompted the referee to point



to the spot.

Coach Oscar Bruzon brought four chances to the squad that lost 0-2 to the Maldives. Defender Bishwanath Ghosh and winger Rakib Hossain returned to the playing eleven after missing the previous match due to the suspensions.

Meanwhile, forward Suman Reza and defender Tutul Hossain Badsha came in place of Martin Miah and Rahmat Mia as the Spanish coach chose to play with two strikers.

The change of the players and the formation clicked for the charges of Bruzon as they took

a lead inside the first ten minutes of the game.

With deafening roars from more than 2500 thousand fans from the galleries, the men in red and green looked more energetic following a five-day gap as Jamal Bhuiyan, Biplu Ahmed, Saad Uddin and Rakib tried to establish the stranglehold in the central area.

Suman Reza nodded in a header off a Jamal Bhuiyan freekick in the 10th minute, sending the fans into a frenzy and also raising hopes of playing the regional football extravaganza final after 16 years.

Nepal started to press hard through both flanks for the equaliser but Rohit Chand drove wide inside the box in the 15th minute, much to the relief of goalkeeper Anisur Rahman.

From a counter, Suman Reza came close to doubling the lead but he struck straight to goalkeeper Kiran Kumar Limbu while a square-pass to unmarked Ibrahim could have given the forward a better option to shoot on the target in the 22nd minute.

Afterwards, Nepal mounted more pressure from the left flank with Tariq struggling in his new position but no damages were done in the first half.

After resumption, Nepal kept their dominance intact in the midfield to put tremendous pressure on the Bangladesh backline while Bangladesh concentrated on counter to widen the margin.

'Dark forces were at work'

SPORTS REPORTER from Male

Oscar Bruzon believes the controversial decision to send off goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico was the turning point of the game before another dubious decision to award Nepal penalty killed off Bangladesh's dream of playing the final of the SAFF Championship at the National Football Stadium in Male yesterday.

Nepal came from a goal behind to level the margin in the 88th minute broke Bangladesh supporters' hearts as the Himalayan nation went on to book the seat of the SAFF Championship final for the first time in the 28-year history of the regional football extravaganza.

"You are talking about one controversial decision of the penalty and I think the penalty was not the only turning point, rather the sending-off of Zico was the [major] turning point of the game.

happened on the pitch today, and the dressing room has been in complete chaos and we understand why," said a frustrated Bruzon.

About the penalty in the dying moments, Bruzon said: "It was a very critical action of the game where the referee was 30 meters away [from the box] but he called for the kick [penalty]."

"But it was a cheating move from the Nepalese player, who had a false dive in the area and of course the referee wasn't in doubt because they don't want Bangladesh to be in the final."

The successful coach in Bangladesh domestic competition informed that their intention was to play attacking football till the last minute despite taking the lead, so that they can kill off the game by scoring the second goal.

"The message to the boys during the interval was to keep playing attacking football and create chances. I want to say



"But Zico didn't handle the ball intentionally; rather, the ball first hit his legs and then it came up to his hands. I think that was the first controversial decision and in the last moment of the game, the referee awarded a silly and controversial penalty to Nepal," said a disappointed Bruzon at the post-match conference.

"Bangladesh is not the best but are one of the best teams in the tournament. We deserved to be in the final," said the 44-year-old coach.

"Since we played against India, the dark forces were at work. We [Bashundhara Kings] could not progress to the AFC Cup and it happened today again.

"From my side, it's all right from the professional ground but it wasn't fair, what

the performance of the boys was really excellent," said the Spaniard.

Wiping his tears, winger Rakib said: "We worked hard for the tournament and everyone was crying in the dressing room. We wouldn't regret it [result] if the call of the referee was fair but it was not and that's why we can't accept it."

Nepal coach Almutairi Abdullah congratulated Bangladesh for giving a tough fight and echoed the same sentiment of Bruzon that the marching order of Zico was the turning point of the game.

Abdullah, however, did not present a clear stance on the penalty decision.

"If I say yes or no, then I'll be a liar. I think it was a penalty but I am not sure," said the Nepal coach.



'Confident that Tigers will get into a good shape'

SPORTS REPORTER

Following a four-wicket defeat against Sri Lanka in the first official practise game on Tuesday, Bangladesh will be looking to rectify their mistakes and get into the groove when they take on Ireland in the second and final warm-up game today ahead of the qualifier round of the ICC World T20.

The match will begin at 12:00pm (BST) at Tolerance Oval in Abu Dhabi -- the same where the first warm-up game was played.

Bangladesh posted 147 for seven against Sri Lanka. However, courtesy of Avishka Fernando's unbeaten fifty, the Lankans managed to chase down the total with an over to spare.

Tigers' head coach Russell Domingo will surely be expecting the batters to step up before the mega event as apart from Soumya Sarkar, who scored a 26-ball 34, none of the other Bangladesh batsmen were able to make an impact in their game against the Lankans.

According to chief selector Minhajul Abedin, it will take some time for the players to adjust as they are frequently moving from one city to another.

"The pitch here at home was a bit slow and as the players are continuously on the move from one city to another, it will take some time for them to adjust. It is not just about the openers. In shorter formats, every

single batsman in the side needs to step up and give their best on the given day," Minhajul told the media yesterday.

Bangladesh, however, at one point were in a good position in their previous game. Sri Lanka were struggling at 75 for six inside eleven overs before Avishka Fernando and Chamika Karunaratne added a match-winning unbeaten 72-run eighth-wicket stand to take the game away from the Tigers.

According to Minhajul there are a lot of things that can be addressed and rectified from the defeat against Sri Lanka.

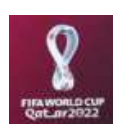
"There will be ups and downs in practise games as you try and experiment many things through these matches in order to evaluate the batting, bowling and fielding department. Everyone is preparing themselves and it was a good opportunity for all the players to play a few back-to-back games.

"We are very confident and the team is expected to get into a good shape ahead of the World Cup. We still have a game to play and we hope to start our World Cup mission on a positive note," he said.

Meanwhile, skipper Mahmudullah Riyad, who was rested in the unofficial warm-up game against Oman A and also in the following game against Sri Lanka due to slight back pain, is expected to be available from the first qualifier game against Scotland on October 17.

'Promised I would always be looking for more and more'

REUTERS, Euro



A 58th career hat-trick from Cristiano Ronaldo helped Portugal stroll to a 5-0 home win over Luxembourg in Group A of World Cup qualifying on Tuesday.

The treble, which meant Ronaldo became the first man to net 10 international hat-tricks, takes his tally to 115 international goals from 182 caps as he continues to pull away as the top men's international goalscorer of all-time.

Victory ensures Portugal remain a point behind leaders Serbia, who moved onto 17 points with a 3-1 home win over Azerbaijan, with a game in hand and superior goal difference.

Portugal had the game all but won within the first 18 minutes.

Ronaldo struck twice from the penalty spot before his Manchester United team mate Bruno Fernandes made it three as he fired in following



good work from Bernardo Silva.

The forward then missed two gilt-edged chances either side of the break as he sought a third, before being denied a spectacular hat-trick goal when Anthony Morris kept out his acrobatic overhead kick.

Portugal did not have to wait long for their

fourth, however, as midfielder Joao Palhinha headed in from the resulting corner with just over 20 minutes to go.

Ronaldo was not to be denied as the hosts pushed on, netting three minutes from time with a header from close range.

Next month Fernando Santos's Portugal side travel to Ireland before then hosting Serbia in what could be a winner-takes-all fixture to qualify for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

"Another victory, another step towards our goal, another historic night in defence of our colours!" Ronaldo wrote on Instagram after the Luxembourg game. "Everything becomes easier when we play at home and in front of an audience that cares for us from the first to the last minute..."

"I had promised that I would always be looking for more and more and more! It's in my DNA and in our DNA, we're never content, we never lower our arms and we always go."

Denmark book World Cup ticket

AFP, Paris



Denmark became the second team to qualify for the 2022 World Cup finals when they beat Austria by a single goal on Tuesday as England were frustrated by Hungary at Wembley.

Joakim Maehle scored in the 53rd minute to send the Danes to Qatar as they build on their surprise run at Euro 2020 this summer when they reached the semi-finals.

"You can only dream about things like this," said Denmark midfielder Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg. "It's crazy. This is huge for me, it's huge for the team, for Danish football and for Denmark. With the age and quality we have, we will only keep growing."

The Danes join Germany, who qualified on Monday, in the finals. Host nation Qatar qualify automatically.

England sputtered as a combative Hungarian side held them to a 1-1 draw. The match was marred by ugly scenes at Wembley



as Hungarian supporters clashed with stewards and police.

Gareth Southgate's side fell behind to Roland Sallai's disputed first-half penalty before John Stones stuck out a boot to score the equaliser in the 37th minute from Phil Foden's cross.

Harry Kane failed to score in a qualifier for the first time in 16 games and was substituted as Hungary's resolute defence kept a

disjointed England side at bay.

"We did not play at the level we need to, simple as that," said Southgate.

England defender Tyrone Mings called for harsher punishments for racism in football after it emerged the trouble at Wembley had flared after police had moved in to arrest a Hungarian supporter for what police called a "racially aggravated public order offence".

Mings said: "Every time we speak on racial abuse the punishments that follow never seem in line with what has happened."

"I sincerely hope that if that is the case, the punishments fall in line with what happened this time." England will be sure of reaching next year's finals if they take four points from their final qualifiers against Albania and San Marino in November.

Poland are second behind England in Group I after a stormy win in Albania.

Play was halted and the teams left the pitch as fans threw bottles after Karol Swiderski scored the winning goal in the 77th minute. The teams later returned to complete the game.

Sweden stayed two points ahead of Spain in Group B thanks to a 2-0 win against Greece.

Scotland got a desperately-needed 1-0 win over the Faroe Islands, meaning they need one more victory from their last two games to secure a playoff spot as they seek to reach a World Cup finals for the first time since 1998.