



Germany players covered their mouths for their team photo before their opening World Cup match in a rebuke of FIFA's clampdown on plans to wear armbands to protest discrimination in host nation Qatar. The team lined up before Wednesday's game against Japan and each of the 11 players covered their mouth with their right hand.

German players stage rebellion in armband row

AFP, Doha

Germany's players covered their mouths for the team photo before their World Cup opener against Japan on Wednesday in protest at FIFA's refusal to allow rainbow-themed armbands.

Captains of seven European teams had planned to wear the anti-discrimination armbands during the tournament in Qatar as part of a campaign for diversity. But they backed down over the threat of disciplinary action from FIFA, including yellow cards.

Germany's football federation tweeted in English moments after the photo protest: "It wasn't about making a political statement — human rights are non-negotiable."

"Denying us the armband is the same as denying us a voice. We stand by our position."

Security at the World Cup have ordered spectators to remove items of clothing featuring rainbow logos.

Underlining tensions over the issue, Belgium's Jan Vertonghen said on Tuesday that he was "afraid" to talk about human rights.

"I'm afraid if I say something about this I might not be able to play tomorrow," the defender said. "It's an experience I've never felt in football before. I feel controlled. I'm afraid to even say something about this."

"We're just saying normal things about racism and discrimination and if you can't even say things about it, that says it all. I want to appear on the pitch tomorrow, so I'll leave it at that."

Leading light Mbappe back on his favourite stage

REUTERS, Al Wakrah

Kylian Mbappe was back where he belongs, according to coach Didier Deschamps, as he once again brought his unique talents, devastating pace and bag of tricks to the World Cup stage as France crushed Australia 4-1 on Tuesday.

The striker may not have grabbed the headlines — with Olivier Giroud's brace equalling Thierry Henry's record tally of goals for his country — but when France needed someone to help them out of a hole, the Paris St Germain man delivered once again.

A goal, an assist and an all-round performance filled with menace was enough to help France to an emphatic win that left them top of Group D.

"Kylian was already among the best, he's fully confident, he oozes serenity," Deschamps told reporters.

"I knew he would be ready because it's his competition."

After Australia took a surprise lead at the Al Janoub Stadium, the night had threatened to turn nasty for the World Cup holders, but even in those early moments when things were not going their way, Mbappe looked sharp as a tack.

He was giving Australia's right back Nathaniel Atkinson a torrid time with his pace out wide before he moved more centrally, causing the centre backs a headache they could not cope with.



After Adrien Rabiot levelled, Mbappe's clever flick freed the midfielder to cross for Giroud to open his account and make it 2-1.

After the break, Mbappe took matters into his own hands, glancing a superb header into the net and crossing for Giroud to double his tally.

The Australian fans had taunted him with chants of "Who are yeh?" in the first half — his performance was a nudge to help them remember.

"It's good if now he starts scoring headers but he's part of a team," added Deschamps, whose side were totally dominant after they grabbed an equaliser.

"If he can do that as well as what he's already done, and that's great, but he's part of a team. And he's always been able to play as part of a team, even though he's a great individual flair player as well."

There were a number of other positives for France as they kicked off their campaign to retain the title.

Those included Rabiot's impact in midfield in the absence of a host of stars including Paul Pogba, a new and youthful central defensive pairing in Ibrahima Konate and Dayot Upamecano, and a flexibility to adapt when they were facing adversity.

Yet while they will face stiffer challenges in the weeks to come, Mbappe looks in the mood and that spells danger for those who will seek to dethrone them.

Korea's masked hero ready to face Uruguay

REUTERS, Doha

South Korea's Son Heung-min will be able to play with a mask in their World Cup Group H opener against Uruguay on Thursday, coach Paulo Bento said as the talismanic forward returns from a surgical procedure to stabilise a fracture around his left eye.

Son was injured midway through Tottenham Hotspur's Champions League tie at Olympique de Marseille earlier this month and there were doubts the 30-year-old would be fit in time for the World Cup group stage.

"Sonny will be able to play," Bento assured reporters on Wednesday. "I think the fact that he will be wearing a mask is not an inconvenience for him, it's quite natural for him. We stuck with the plan when we arrived here... But we will see tomorrow how it will be. Our hope is that he will be comfortable to the greatest extent possible and use the best strategy so that he can feel at ease during the game. He knows and we know that after his injury we cannot take any risks."

South Korea have failed to replicate their magical run to the 2002 World Cup semi-finals in recent tournaments and Bento said he would not burden them with the aim of qualifying for the knockout stages, taking things "one match at a time" instead.

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"Our aspirations is something we conveyed, we wish to compete in the best manner possible in the three group games," he said.

"We are well aware that we will face many difficulties with rivals we play against and we're aware that in the history of World Cups, South Korea only advanced to knockouts twice — one of them when they were co-hosts with Japan."

"I don't see any reason to put any pressure on their shoulders. If this was a team that always advanced, then I would say, 'Yes, we need to qualify (for the next stage).'"



INFO ZONE		
URUGUAY VS SOUTH KOREA		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
Matches 8	Federico Valverde	Son Heung-min
Uruguay 6	Caps 44	Caps 104
South Korea 1	Goals 4	Goals 35
Draw 1		



Croatia talisman Luka Modric and Morocco superstar Achraf Hakimi fight for possession during their World Cup match at the Al Bayt Stadium yesterday. The match produced the third goalless draw of the 2022 World Cup, especially striking after the 2018 World Cup had witnessed just one goalless match.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Croats fail to live up to Modric's expectations

AFP, Al Khor

Morocco held Croatia to a 0-0 draw in their opening game of the World Cup on Wednesday, producing a spirited display against the 2018 runners-up led by Luka Modric.

Backed by Qatar's large Moroccan community at the Al Bayt Stadium, the Atlas Lions followed up north African rivals Tunisia's strong performance against dark horses Denmark a day earlier to frustrate Croatia.

"This was an extremely difficult game," said Croatia captain Modric. "I do believe as the tournament goes on we'll be better and we'll adopt a more proactive attitude."

Modric insisted Croatia are capable of making another deep run despite a sluggish start in the early afternoon heat.

"We've not come here to just play and get out the group," said Modric.

"Our ambitions are a bit greater on the basis of our Russia achievement, but we need to take it one step at a time."

"Even before the 2018 World Cup we said our primary goal was to make it out the group. If we manage to do that we can be a dangerous opponent for any team."

Coach Zlatko Dalic had urged Croatia to exercise caution following Saudi Arabia's shock win over Argentina, a result Morocco captain Romain Saiss said had "opened the door" for the tournament's less-fancied teams.

Morocco took the game to a Croatia side featuring four players who started the 2018 final but struggled to create genuine chances against a defence marshalled by the experienced Dejan Lovren.

Azzedine Ounahi strangely opted against shooting when well placed inside the area, with Hakim Ziyech and Achraf Hakimi heavily involved down the right without ever truly threatening Croatia.

Modric, the former Ballon d'Or winner appearing at his fourth World Cup at the age of 37, then hammered over from the edge of the box.

Sofyan Amrabat poked Lovren's goal-bound effort away off the line after a scramble at a corner, while Hakimi's free-kick at the other end was beaten to safety by Croatian keeper Dominik Livakovic.

Only once have Morocco gone beyond the group stage, in 1986, but they will rate their chances of advancing with games to come against an ageing Belgium team and Group F outsiders Canada.

Croatia pushed for a late winner but found Morocco's defence in unforgiving mood as Walid Regragui's side secured a valuable and deserved point.

"I think it's a very good point for us," said Regragui, who was only appointed as Morocco coach in late August.

"It keeps us alive for the next two games. I'm very proud of my players. I think this game makes us more confident."