

I am their dad, Song says after Onana exclusion

REUTERS, Al Wakrah

Cameroon coach Rigobert Song praised his team's fighting spirit after they salvaged a 3-3 draw against Serbia at the World Cup on Monday, without first choice goalkeeper Andre Onana who was left out of the squad for disciplinary reasons.

Onana was marked as "absent" on the team sheet at Al Janoub stadium and Song explained that he had to put the team first for a game that left the Indomitable Lions on one point in the group before they play Brazil.

"He is a very important player but we are in a competition and my role is to put the team first ahead of an individual," Song told a news conference amid reports of a falling out over tactics.

"He is one of the best keepers in Europe. This is not about his performances but you have to preserve the squad," he added about the Inter Milan keeper. "Maybe we needed a strong signal. It's a big risk that I took. But I'm the dad of these kids so when I have to take risks and make



decisions, I do that and I stand by what I do."

The 46-year-old Song, who won a record 137 caps for Cameroon and played in four World Cups with the African side, has yet to decide whether Onana will be sent home or if he will get a second chance.

"We will see if he continues. We will see if he abides by the rules again," he said.

Stand-in keeper Devis Epassy struggled, notably allowing too much space on his left for Sergej Milinkovic-Savic, but Song was not concerned. "We were leading and then after those two (stoppage-time) goals we thought it was over, but we saw that the players rallied back and I can only be happy about that," Song said.



South Korea fought valiantly against Ghana, with Cho Gue-sung leading the charge in their World Cup match. After the Asians had fallen behind 2-0, the 24-year-old striker sensationally got them back into the game with two goals in the span of three minutes, but ultimately, Ghana would find a sucker punch and leave the Education City Stadium in Al Rayyan with a 3-2 triumph.

PHOTO: REUTERS

In Qatar, Mideast tensions spill into stadiums

REUTERS, Ben Gurion

Balloons in the national colours of Israel and Qatar festooned the departure gate for the first commercial flight between the countries on Sunday, permitted by Doha for fans of the World Cup despite the absence of formal bilateral relations.

The passengers' excitement was mainly at being able to attend the soccer tournament - for which Israel did not qualify - with such surprising ease. But several also voiced hope that the temporary non-stop connections would clear the way to fuller detente between the Gulf emirate and Israel.

They were issued contact cards for a discreet Israeli consular delegation sent ahead to provide emergency support - a reminder of their current semi-recognised status in Qatar, which is close to Iran and has hosted leaders of Palestinian Hamas.

"There were a few concerns, I cannot deny that," said Sagi Ashkevitz, who was flying out with three friends to his second World Cup.

"But in the end, the idea of watching (Argentina forward Lionel) Messi for the last time, together with the idea that we are actually making history, overcame all of the concerns, and we are happy to be a part of it."

At least 10,000 Israelis are expected at the month-long matches, most of them coming through third countries. Those boarding the TUS Airways plane



at Ben Gurion Airport had originally been told they would have a brief stopover in Cyprus.

But they got a non-stop three-hour connection instead, thanks to a deal announced by FIFA last week which it described as allowing Palestinians as well as Israelis to fly direct. Read full story

While Sunday's passengers including both Israeli Jews and Arabs, there was no one from the Palestinian territories. According to Gabriel Mizrahi, CEO of ticketing agent Tiktik, this was due to having booked the flight in May, when his Palestinian clients preferred indirect routes through neighbouring Jordan.

Six more Tel Aviv-Doha flights for the World Cup have been approved so far, Mizrahi said. Return tickets cannot be bought separately, he said - a means of ensuring that those who fly back are the same passengers cleared by Ben Gurion security.

At least two of the fans said they would attend matches in which Israel's arch-foes Iran were playing.

"I'm going to sit on the Iranian side of the stadium," said Shlomi Lakash, wearing a baseball cap whose colour - Islamic green - he joked would help him blend in. "God is with me."

Riad Ziadna, a member of Israel's Arab minority who held a soccer ball as he stood in the check-in line, said he believed the World Cup would be "the starter's pistol for coexistence all over the Middle East".

THE LATERAL VIEW Qatar World Cup gets spicy

IRESH ZAKER

Things are getting spicy in Qatar. On the field, nothing is going according to script. Pre-tournament favourites like Belgium are teetering on the edge of elimination, and the qualification picture is changing wildly with every game and every minute of the first round.

Germany looked set to succumb to a prolonged case of the winner's curse, which seemed to have been carried over from 2018 when, as reigning champions, they got booted out of the tournament in the first round.

Certainly, based on Costa Rica and Japan's form in their respective openers, it looked like Japan would easily collect all three points, or at least one, from the encounter between the two countries, and push Germany closer to the edge. But, clearly, things did not pan out that way.

Even in their own game, Germany seemed to have been doomed to defeat against a mostly dominating Spanish side, and again on the brink. But then Sane came on, and helped keep the Mannschaft and their supporters sane for at least one more game.

Within the space of minutes, the Germans went from being almost dead and buried to becoming marginal favourites to finish second in Group E. They still have to beat Costa Rica by more than a goal though, and hope that Japan draw or lose to Spain. Both scenarios are likely but, as we have already seen in this tournament, likely is far removed from guaranteed. No one would be shocked if Costa Rica were to qualify from this group.



Indomitable Lions refuse to be tamed

REUTERS, Al Wakrah

Serbia coach Dragan Stojkovic had said his side would approach their World Cup Group G fixture against Cameroon with a view to "taming" the Indomitable Lions, but veteran striker Vincent Aboubakar had other ideas.

With both Serbia and Cameroon desperate for points after their opening defeats, they played out one of the most entertaining games of the tournament, attacking at every opportunity and refusing to sit back.

In the end, a 3-3 draw was probably a fair result in a game where the pendulum swung back and forth as the teams exchanged leads, and it was the introduction of Aboubakar for Cameroon that proved crucial for his side.

Facing the ignominy of equalling the record for nine consecutive defeats in World Cup tournaments, Aboubakar's goal and assist - less than three minutes apart - kept the African side alive in the tournament.

"In these competitions you have to show desire for victory," Aboubakar said.

"My team mates had a great first half despite some small mistakes. We felt they were shaky and bit tired. When I came on, I tried to make the most of it."

Samuel Eto'o was the last player to score a winner for Cameroon at the World Cup 20 years ago, and the president of the country's football federation had waited outside the team hotel to embrace the



squad before their trip to the stadium.

Some of his magic seemed to have rubbed off on the players as Jean-Charles Castelletto opened the scoring to give Cameroon their first goal at the World Cup in eight years.

But Stojkovic's side took back control with three goals either side of halftime to break Cameroonian hearts in the stands while the Serbians were in full voice.

Cameroon coach Rigobert Song cut a frustrated figure on the touchline and when he saw the single-striker formation failing to yield results, he decided to go for broke, throwing Aboubakar into the mix.

Once a teenager who played for Cameroon at the 2010 World Cup, the 30-year-old is now the on-field leader of the African side, providing calmness on

the pitch and a touch of class.

Song paired his former team mate with Bayern Munich forward Eric Choupo-Moting up front in what essentially became an old-school 4-4-2 formation to take on Serbia's three-man defence.

With Aboubakar playing off the shoulder of the offside trap the impact was almost instantaneous, as Serbia's defence - as well as the linesman - simply failed to spot his well-timed runs.

A glorious finish for Cameroon's second goal when he found acres of space before chipping the keeper was almost cruelly ruled out when the linesman raised his flag, before VAR intervened to confirm the goal.

The Serbians were shell-shocked and before they could recover, Aboubakar delivered the sucker punch.

His run for the equaliser was almost a carbon copy of his goal as he broke through the lines again before whipping in a cross for an easy tap-in for Choupo-Moting as Cameroon completed an improbable comeback.

Even off the ball, Aboubakar was busy conducting play, arms raised and pointing at his free team mates, and giving the Cameroon fans in green, red and yellow something to roar about with the rapid two-goal salvo.

"The most important is to give the Cameroon people emotions. What matters is the mindset and the collective spirit, and in that regard we played a great game," Aboubakar said.

