



In one of the most politically-fuelled encounters, Iran will be taking on the USA in their final World Cup Group B game with both sides needing nothing less than victory -- especially as that remains the requirement for securing a last 16 berth for both sides. PHOTO: REUTERS

‘Not making last 16 would be hard to digest’

REUTERS, Al Rayyan

Senegal coach Aliou Cisse said his team are expected to reach the World Cup knockout stages due to their status as African champions but his players are adapting to the pressure well.

Having reached the quarterfinals on their World Cup debut in 2002, Senegal were eliminated in the group stage on fair play points four years ago in Russia.

Senegal need to beat Ecuador in their final Group A game on Tuesday to qualify for the last 16. They could still remain in contention with a draw, provided hosts Qatar beat three-times finalists Netherlands.

“I come from a country where we don’t like losing,” Cisse told reporters on Monday. “We’re always hungry for that win. Not going to the round of 16 would be difficult to digest. “We’re okay, we’re dealing with the pressure and stress. For me, it’s good stress.”

Meanwhile, Ecuador need a win or draw to qualify, after beating Qatar 2-0 and outplaying the Dutch in a 1-1 draw to go joint top of Group A.

#### ECUADOR VS SENEGAL

| HEAD-TO-HEAD | PLAYERS TO WATCH                  |                               |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Matches 1    | <b>Pervis Estupinan</b> (Ecuador) | <b>Ismaila Sarr</b> (Senegal) |
| Ecuador 0    | Caps 11                           | Caps 30                       |
| Senegal 1    | Goals 0                           | Goals 3                       |

## More than just last 16 at stake

AFP, Doha

Twenty-four years after their first World Cup meeting billed as the “Mother of all football matches”, Iran and the United States face off in a politically-charged showdown on Tuesday with a place in the knockout rounds up for grabs.

Decades of mutual enmity between the arch geopolitical foes is the backdrop to what promises to be a white-hot sporting occasion at Doha’s Al Thumama Stadium.

In the context of the tournament, the stakes are simple -- a win for either team secures a place in the last 16 while defeat will guarantee elimination. But that’s only in context of the tournament as their rivalry goes way beyond it.

The United States and Iran have been bitter ideological enemies for more than four decades, severing diplomatic relations after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Quite what bearing that has on a 90-minute World Cup football match involving 22 players remains to be seen.

United States coach Gregg Berhalter has been at pains to dampen down suggestions that the game carries a political dimension.

“I envision the game being hotly contested for the fact that both teams want to advance to the next round -- not because of politics or because of relations between our countries,” Berhalter said.

Yet Berhalter’s desire for politics to be absent from the occasion may be wishful thinking.

A rare public relations gaffe by US Soccer -- posting a modified version of Iran’s national flag on the US team’s social media feeds in what it said was a gesture of solidarity with Iranian women protesters -- has infuriated football authorities in Tehran.

The offending post was removed from official US Soccer feeds on Sunday after the Iran Football Federation lodged a complaint with world governing body FIFA.

The controversy almost certainly guarantees that what was

already shaping as a nail-biting showdown on Tuesday is likely to carry a crackle of political tension.

That was certainly the case when Iran and the USA met for the first time at the 1998 World Cup in France, the Iranians claiming a memorable 2-1 victory at the Stade Gerland in Lyon.

Iran, the designated away team, refused to abide by the standard FIFA protocol of walking over to the American players for the handshake before kick-off.

That potential flashpoint was deftly defused by Swiss referee Urs Meier, who suggested that the two teams pose for a joint team photo.

Iran’s players, who presented US players with bouquets of white roses to symbolise peace, happily complied, linking arms with their American counterparts.

Iran coach Jalal Talebi and veteran defender Mohammad Khakpour would later reveal how much the Iranians had invested emotionally in the game.

“Just imagine being told for six months, repeatedly, that this game is the most important game in our history, which it really was,” Talebi said in a 2018 interview.

Khakpour added: “I personally was contacted by people whose family members had been martyred, those who had lost children in the Iran-Iraq war. Fathers, mothers, called and said ‘This game really does matter to us. You have to go and win this game for us.’” The USA’s coach at the 1998 World Cup, Steve Sampson, has since expressed regret that he did not use the political tensions between the two countries as a motivator.

“We were asked by FIFA, by US Soccer, by the organising committee in France, to make it about football, and not about politics. And I went along with that,” Sampson told Time magazine.

“In hindsight, I would have made it about politics. A coach’s job is to use any and every tool available to him to prepare his team.”

## Netherlands look to deepen Qatar’s woes

AGENCIES

Netherlands play Qatar at the World Cup in Al Khor on Tuesday needing a win or a draw to qualify to the last 16 for the 11th time regardless of the result between Senegal and Ecuador. Meanwhile Qatar, who prematurely exited their own party following underwhelming performances in their opening two Group A games face further humiliation in what will be the first meeting between the two sides.

Qatar’s coach Felix Sanchez said he would not change a thing if he were to go back in time to before the start of the World Cup.

“If I go back in time? It’s easy to talk about things after it’s over,” Sanchez told a news conference. “I think we have prepared in the best possible way, but everything has to be considered in perspective, we have been working with this group for a long time.”

“If we continue to work on a daily basis, I think

| NETHERLANDS VS QATAR                     |                                 |                           |
|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| The two sides have never met each other. | PLAYERS TO WATCH                |                           |
|  | <b>Cody Gakpo</b> (Netherlands) | <b>Akram Afif</b> (Qatar) |
|  | Caps 11                         | Caps 90                   |
|  | Goals 5                         | Goals 26                  |



we can reduce the gap with the other teams and achieve something,” Sanchez opined.

Netherlands coach Louis van Gaal said he thinks Cody Gakpo will “evolve much further” after the youngster’s two crucial goals at the World Cup.

“I had more or less expected that he would evolve this way but I believe that he’s going to evolve even further, much further, so I’m not surprised (by his performances) at all,” Van Gaal told a pre-match press conference in Qatar.

“It’s marvellous that he can do this on the world stage.” The Oranje need only to avoid defeat against already-eliminated hosts Qatar on Tuesday to be sure of a place in the knockout phase.

If Netherlands lose they will qualify directly to the second round if Ecuador beat Senegal, but if Senegal win the goal difference or fairplay tiebreaker will decide second place in the group.



## Odds stacked against Wales in Battle of Britain

REUTERS, DOHA

The odds are heavily stacked against Wales reaching the last 16 ahead of their so-called Battle of Britain against England on Tuesday but if they are to fly home early they will want to do so with pride restored.

Wales have waited 64 long years to qualify for a World Cup but after conceding two goals to Iran deep into stoppage on Friday, it looks like being only a brief stay in the Middle East.

That late defeat left Wales crestfallen and at the bottom of group B and needing to beat England for only the 14th time in 104 meetings, a rivalry dating back to 1879.

Even a victory might not be enough to save Wales as they would also need the other remaining group match between Iran and the United States to end in a draw.

There is one other scenario, one which has never happened before, in which Wales must beat England by four goals, in which case they would go through to the last 16, whatever the result of the other game, at the expense of England.

#### WALES VS ENGLAND

| HEAD-TO-HEAD | PLAYERS TO WATCH           |                             |
|--------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Matches 103  | <b>Gareth Bale</b> (Wales) | <b>Harry Kane</b> (England) |
| England 68   | Caps 110                   | Caps 77                     |
| Wales 14     | Goals 41                   | Goals 51                    |
| Draw 21      |                            |                             |



While the complexities of the maths are head-spinning, Wales will just want to land a blow on their old rivals, snap a run of six consecutive defeats against them and claim a first win over England since 1984.

For that to happen they will require some magic from their talisman Gareth Bale, who scored an equalising penalty in the opening game against the U.S. but who was rather anonymous in the defeat by Iran.

The prospect of facing England may just spark something special from the 33-year-old former Real Madrid and Tottenham Hotspur player, who is most likely to be playing the last World Cup match of his career.

While England are in a far more comfortable position, leading the group, they went from being so-called world beaters to being booed by their own fans in the space of five days in Qatar -- thrashing Iran 6-2 before

being largely outplayed by a youthful U.S. side in a 0-0 draw.

England forward Marcus Rashford said criticism of the team’s performance in their draw against the United States is unjustified and that fans should withhold judgement until after their final group game against Wales.

After a thumping 6-2 win over Iran in their World Cup opener, England’s level dropped

drastically against the Americans and they were fortunate not to lose, although they remain in a strong position heading into today’s clash.

“When you win a game, you are the best team in the world. When you lose, you are the worst. That’s football. As players you have to keep a balance,” Rashford, 25, told reporters.

“If we play well in the next game, that USA game will be forgotten. It’s not a nice feeling. But to be honest we don’t need fans to boo us to know we have not played well.

“It was a feeling that was mutual amongst the group -- that we could have done better. When you don’t win it’s disappointing but we can’t be so negative about it,” Rashford added.

England Manager Gareth Southgate began first two games with identical starting line-ups, but could well decide to make some tweaks against Wales with Manchester City’s Jack Grealish in line for a start and perhaps an opportunity for striker Callum Wilson.

Only a four-goal defeat could send England crashing out, with bookmakers pricing that as a 400-1 shot, so there is an opportunity for Southgate to tinker with his line-up and perhaps even protect striker Harry Kane ahead of the last 16.

World Cup 2018 Golden Boot winner Kane is yet to score in the tournament and was subdued against the United States having recovered from an ankle injury sustained against Iran.