

## THE LATERAL VIEW

# Fearful of impending chaos

IRESH ZAKER

Iran became the latest Asian country to exit the World Cup 2022, and I have to say that things are not looking good for our continent. Technically speaking, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia could all qualify beyond the group stage. However, in their respective fixtures, Japan and South Korea would have to beat Spain and Portugal, two teams that are fairly on top of their game right now. It will not be, to put it very mildly, easy.

Saudi Arabia's qualification picture is less daunting but poses its own set of challenges, but I will not delve into the various permutations. Suffice to say that if Saudi Arabia were to go through to the second round, it would most likely be at Argentina's expense.

The aforementioned challenges arise mostly because we live in Bangladesh. As we are all painfully or happily aware of, there are many Argentina fans in this country. Argentina's failure to go past the first round would thus likely trigger mass heartbreak and hysteria.

My friend, Nazim Farhan Chowdhury, provided the fol-



lowing calculations. It may be a little simplistic, but I don't think it is that far off the mark. With Bangladesh's population being 170 million and assuming that at least eighty per cent of our people follow the World Cup, it would mean that there are 136 million football fans in the country. Now, assuming at least 45 per cent of the 136 million support Argentina, it implies we have 61 million Albiceleste supporters in Bangladesh.

Not quiet and casual supporters mind you, rather 61 million loudly passionate fans. Compare that to Argentina's total population of 46 million, you understand why we are becoming globally famous as a World Cup crazy nation, and why a bad end to Argentina's run makes me gravely concerned.



Now a word in the defence of my people -- by my people, I mean the proud and slightly energetic men and women of my home district Brahmanbaria. It seems to me that every time there is a contentious situation in the sporting world, especially relating to a Brazil or Argentina game, some people take great pleasure in contemplating the duress that the Superintendent of Police in Brahmanbaria must be under.

To these people I say, look at what happened in Brussels after the Morocco game. To these people I say, look at how well behaved we have been through the first round of World Cup 2022. To my people I say, regardless of what happened last night, please keep things under control and let the naysayers worry about the SP of Brussels from here on instead.



Tunisia had taken a sensational lead against France through Wahbi Khazri in the 58th minute and then held their nerve for the bombardment that followed after France had sent on substitutes Kylian Mbappe, Antoine Griezmann and Ousmane Dembele. Their dream appeared to be shattered when Griezmann found the back of the net in the final minute of the match, but after a dramatic VAR review, Tunisia recorded a famous win. Unfortunately, it was not enough for them to go through the next round, with Australia's win over Denmark meaning they took second spot in Group D while France finished top.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Tunisia exit with heads held high

AFP, Doha

Tunisia captain Wahbi Khazri said his side would go out of the World Cup with heads held high after completing their campaign with a shock 1-0 win over holders France on Wednesday.

"Of course we are disappointed to be going out because we didn't do enough in the first two matches so we are left with a bit of a bitter taste but I think we have made the Tunisian people proud," said Khazri, who scored the only goal of the game in the second half.

It is Tunisia's first ever World Cup win against European opposition and it left them with four points in Group D after they started off by drawing with Denmark and losing to Australia.

However, it was not enough for them to reach the last 16 for the first time in their history as Australia beat the Danes 1-0 in Wednesday's other game to progress alongside the already-qualified French.

France coach Didier Deschamps made nine changes to his side with Kylian Mbappe among the players rested, but Khazri dismissed suggestions that the holders had not taken Tunisia seriously.

"They still had top-class players out there but we were superb and I think the result is down to us," he said.

"Unfortunately in football it is better not to have to

rely on others for results, but we can go out with our heads held high."

Brought up on the Mediterranean island of Corsica, Khazri was one of six French-born players in the Tunisian line-up and also plays his club football in France for Montpellier.

"I come from a little place in Corsica and here I was playing against players who I usually watch on television playing in the Champions League," he said.

"France have already shown they can win the World Cup and now I hope they go all the way."

Meanwhile coach Jalel Kadri refused to discuss his own future after Tunisia completed their best World Cup campaign since 1978.

"The contract I have is based on objectives," said Kadri, who had eyed a place in the last 16.

"The objective was not fulfilled but we still have some time to look at things before we take a final decision and that will be up to the Tunisian Federation."

Deschamps sent on Mbappe as well as Griezmann and Ousmane Dembele in an attempt to avoid France's first World Cup group-stage defeat since their disastrous 2010 campaign and the move almost worked.

Mbappe looked a constant menace, but it was Griezmann who thought he had equalised deep into injury time when he volleyed home inside the box, but the referee disallowed the goal for offside after a lengthy VAR review.



# Valencia makes tearful apology to Ecuador

REUTERS, Doha

Ecuador's veteran captain Enner Valencia could not control his tears as he apologised to his country for the side's failure to reach the knockout stages of the World Cup in Qatar.

But Valencia, whose team came agonisingly close to reaching the last 16 and matching Ecuador's previous best showing in 2006, was quickly consoled by fans who hailed El Tri (The Tricolour) for inspiring them with excellent performances.

"We offer an apology to all of Ecuador," Valencia said, crying in the aftermath of Tuesday's 2-1 defeat to

African champions Senegal which stopped them from progressing.

"We didn't expect this, we were very happy with what we were doing ... Unfortunately we could not meet Ecuador's expectations," he added.

The 33-year-old remains a hero at home, however.

Ecuador's all-time top scorer bagged three goals in a 2-0 opening win over Qatar and a 1-1 draw against Netherlands when they deserved to win and secure passage to the knockout stage.

A draw would have done against Senegal, but Ecuador paid for two lapses in concentration to give away a penalty and then a second goal straight after the euphoria of pulling back to 1-1.

"Unfortunately that's football, it bites you," said defender Angel Preciado. "We're so sorry not to go through and we thank our nation for their wholehearted support."



# 'I could see in their eyes they were ready'

AFP, Al Wakrah

Australia reached the World Cup last 16 for the first time since 2006 after Mathew Leckie's strike earned them a gritty 1-0 upset win over Denmark in their final Group D match on Wednesday.

After a goalless first half in which Denmark looked lively and had more possession, Australia scored on the counter in the 60th minute when Leckie got past the Danish defence and twisted into space before slotting the ball home.

Australia finished second with six points, level with group winners France after the world champions lost 1-0 to Tunisia. Denmark were bottom on one point with Tunisia third on four.

"I'm proud, exhausted, everything really. It's hard to describe the emotions right now," Leckie told Australian broadcaster SBS. "We always knew we could do it as a group. We had our doubters but our spirit, our belief, our work ethic and

how close we are as a group shows on the pitch.

"The last 15, 20 minutes we battled until the end. It didn't matter what they threw at us, we weren't conceding. We'll make the most of it tonight, but then it's all about recovery."

The Australians have qualified for the knockout rounds for only the second time, having also done so 16 years ago when they lost 1-0 to Italy in the last 16.

"We've been working on this for four-and-a-half years, and I could see in their eyes they were ready tonight," coach Arnold said.

"No celebrations tonight! That's why we won after a great win against Tunisia, no celebrations, no emotion, sleep and no social media."

Denmark thought they had been handed a lifeline with about 20 minutes to go when the referee awarded a penalty for a foul on Kasper Dolberg, but it was quickly overturned after the flag was raised for offside.

Denmark coach Kasper Hjulmand said his side got too emotional.

"We haven't played with the tempo and the rhythm in our own game. I think we started pretty well tonight, with good positions. And then you see the structures just go out of the match," Hjulmand told a news conference.

"And it's too emotional and too little quality, and it's the only thing we shouldn't do against Australia in a match like this, go in with big emotions and lots of fight, we have to play with quality."

That quality was sorely lacking in Qatar where Denmark drew with Tunisia and lost to France and Australia.

"I think we're one thing for sure is that we didn't play our best. I think the quality was okay against France. I think it was not a great, great performance, but it was okay," Hjulmand said.

"I think it was par in terms of playing one of the best teams but the two other games? Not good enough."



Australia sealed a berth in the last 16 by beating Denmark 1-0 in their final group-stage match, with Mathew Leckie netting the decisive strike. It was the first time the Socceroos scored a goal in all three of their group-stage games and only the second time they have made it to the knockouts.

PHOTO: REUTERS