

## Son eyes 'another miracle'

AFP, Doha

Son Heung-min wants his South Korea side to pull off "another miracle" and beat Brazil on Monday in the World Cup last 16 after their last-gasp heroics against Portugal.

The Koreans' tournament looked to be over until substitute Hwang Hee-chan popped up in injury time to score the winner in a 2-1 victory over already qualified Portugal on Friday in Qatar.

That propelled them into the knockout rounds and a daunting date with Brazil, one of the pre-tournament favourites.

But skipper Son, who has been playing in a mask following surgery last month for a fracture around his left eye, said they are not ready to go home just yet.



After what has been a tournament of surprises, the Koreans now want to pull off another one.

"This is great but our tournament is not over," Spurs attacker Son said following the emotions of the dramatic win over Portugal.

"We've always talked about reaching the round of 16 as our objective but we should now try to go beyond that," Son, who shed tears of joy, told Korean media in Doha.

"I hope we can script another miracle," he added, having set up Hwang with a searing run and threaded pass through the legs of a Portuguese defender.

Some in South Korea are beginning to draw parallels with the national side of 2002 who stunned the world as co-hosts by reaching the semi-finals.

Current assistant coach Sergio Costa, who took charge from the sidelines for the Group H clash with Portugal because coach Paulo Bento was suspended, resisted such talk.

"I cannot compare because I watched the World Cup in 2002 on TV and didn't know them personally," said Costa.

"I've seen a few games from the past but I cannot make a comparison because I didn't know the Korean team back then.

I can tell you what it is now -- it's a team that is very honest.

"That is something that we are very proud of, we see those players with a strong personality and they deserve what we have accomplished," he added.



Cameroon captain Vincent Aboubakar takes off his shirt after scoring a 92nd-minute winner against five-time champions Brazil in their World Cup Group G fixture at Lusail Stadium on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Rude awakening for Serbia

REUTERS, Doha

Half-fit players, a leaky defence and a controversial flag that raised diplomatic tensions underlined yet another exit for Serbia in the group stage at the World Cup, proving that their resurgence earlier this year was nothing but a false dawn.

Under coach Dragan Stojkovic, Serbia were fancied to give their Group G opponents a run for their money having secured automatic qualification by forcing a talented Portugal side into a playoff to qualify for the World Cup.

With an encouraging showing in the Nations League earlier this year, Serbia were expected to finally break their World Cup group stage jinx having never reached the knockouts since the break-up of Yugoslavia.

But despite having two promising strikers in Aleksandar Mitrovic and Dusan Vlahovic, both of whom were in fine form in the league with Fulham and Juventus respectively, the two started together only in their final group game.

Mitrovic scored nine goals in the Premier League but an ankle injury severely hampered his preparations for the tournament as Serbia sweated

## Africa's emphatic response in Qatar

AFP, Doha

Four years ago Africa was left without a representative in the World Cup last 16 for the first time since the round was introduced in 1986, but the response has been emphatic in Qatar.

The 2022 tournament has seen two teams from the continent reach the knockout phase for only the second time -- after Algeria and Nigeria in 2014.

African nations have also taken a record-breaking 24 points in the group stage, smashing the previous best of 15 points in 1998.

Morocco beat the world's second-ranked side Belgium and Canada en route to the top of Group F, while Senegal bounced back from an opening defeat by the Netherlands to record wins over Qatar and Ecuador.

Brazil were beaten by an African team for the first time with a 1-0 defeat by Cameroon, who exited the tournament in glory.

For Morocco, their clash with Spain next Tuesday will be a first appearance in the knockout stage for 36 years.

Their fans will turn up in their thousands again to cheer on the only remaining Arab country in the World Cup.

"We hope to fly the flag of African football high," said Morocco coach Walid Regragui.

"Often we've been described as being sub-par, not as good as elsewhere.

"But I think at this World Cup we are showing we can give any other team a run for their money, whether they be European teams or South American teams.

"I hope in the future this means we'll be seeing more African teams do well at the World Cup and why not an African champion?"

The 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico will involve more African countries than ever before, with the tournament set to expand from 32 to 48 teams.

If it does not happen this year, Africa will be expecting its first World Cup semi-finalists sooner rather than later.

Senegal were the closest to getting past the group stage in

Russia in 2018, missing out by virtue of having more yellow cards than Japan.

But they banished those memories when Kalidou Koulibaly volleyed them to victory against Ecuador, after saying they were inspired by Morocco's win over Belgium.

"We saw what Morocco did. They had a beautiful win over Belgium," said Senegal coach Aliou Cisse.

"Yes, it can be a source of inspiration for us."

The sides that went out in the group stage still made a mark on the tournament.

Tunisia claimed a famous 1-0 win over holders France and Cameroon ended an eight-match losing streak at the World Cup with a thrilling comeback to draw 3-3 with Serbia before beating five-time winners Brazil.

More and more African players are starring at top European clubs. Even with Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane absent from this World Cup, the dividends of that are clear to see.

European teams have won each of the past four World Cups and no side from outside Europe or South America has ever even reached the final.

"You have to be strong for your first match against a European team because European teams are our foes when it comes to these events," added Regragui.

"We have players who play for European clubs... We need to take the European mindset and make it our mindset."

The closest an African team has come to making the semi-finals was Ghana in 2010, when Luis Suarez's handball and the resulting missed penalty by Asamoah Gyan led to a shootout defeat in South Africa.

The Black Stars could not avenge that heartbreak on Friday, as Andre Ayew's missed penalty at 0-0 was history repeating itself and proved costly in a 2-0 defeat. But Ghana were at least happy to knock Uruguay out and send South Korea through.

"For me, yes (It was good to knock Uruguay out)," said midfielder Daniel Amartey.



## 'Swiss players eager to stretch WC run'

REUTERS, Doha

Switzerland made it through to the last 16 of the World Cup for a third time in a row after beating Serbia 3-2 in their final Group G game on Friday but their run in this tournament is far from finished, coach Murat Yakin said.

His team, who have now reached the knockout stages in their last five tournaments, including at the Euros, had to dig deep to come back from 2-1 down to snatch second place in their group.

"The players had the goal to make history and this is still not finished," Yakin said. "The team has moved closer together today, it is more experienced. Now we will enjoy the moment. In football we live for these moments."

The Swiss, who next face Portugal in the last 16, scored twice either side of the break with Breel Embolo and Remo Freuler to go back in front after Aleksandar Mitrovic's glancing header had cancelled out Xherdan Shaqiri's lead and Dusan Vlahovic's low shot had put them briefly ahead.

The game became bad-tempered towards the end as the Serbs needed



to win and with the referee showing 11 yellow cards.

Man-of-the-match Granit Xhaka, born to ethnic Albanian parents from Kosovo who in the previous World Cup had enraged Serbs by making a nationalist gesture when the two sides met, was often in the middle of these spats with Serbian opponents.

"I saw Granit focus on football. It was a fair game. It was a normal exchange with a bit of emotions. It cost us a lot of power and a lot of emotions. We started well, took the lead but then we lost possession twice and fell behind," said Yakin.

"But my players deserve a huge compliment for the way they came back."

Switzerland finished with six points, level with Group G winners Brazil but behind on goal difference, and will now turn their focus to their game against Portugal.

"We deserved this win," Yakin said. "Portugal do not like to play against us. They are the favourites but in a knockout stage game anything can happen."

"I think the team is ready for this match and the battle."

## Pele moved to palliative care

AGENCIES

Brazilian icon Pele has been transferred to palliative care after doctors discovered that he was no longer responding to chemotherapy.

Pele has been receiving treatment for bowel cancer and was recently diagnosed with a respiratory infection during his latest spell in hospital, although he was soon stabilised in relation to the infection and could continue treatment on the cancer.

According to Folha de Sao Paulo, chemotherapy was no longer having any positive effects on Pele and the decision was made to transfer the 82-year-old to palliative care, where he is receiving comforting measures for his shortness of breath and pain.

He remains in hospital while he undergoes treatment for the respiratory infection.

"The response [to the antibiotics for the infection] has been adequate and the patient is stable with a general improvement in his health," a hospital statement read.

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over his availability while Vlahovic did not arrive in Doha 100%.

"We came here with a lot of niggles and injuries to our key players. This was very difficult to manage, it was difficult to have a high level of performance at a World Cup," Stojkovic said.

When Mitrovic did make the starting line-up against Brazil in their opener, he was well off the pace and barely received service in a humbling 2-0 defeat by the pre-tournament favourites which immediately put Serbia on the backfoot.

While Serbia did net three goals against Cameroon, their defence was given a reality check when Vincent Aboubakar ghosted past their offside trap twice in three minutes in a 3-3 draw.

In the final game, Switzerland ran riot to hand Serbia a 3-2 defeat that consigned Stojkovic's side to the bottom of the group while the Swiss set up a last 16 clash with Portugal.

Stojkovic had said before the game that he had hoped to find holes in the Swiss defence, just like in their cheese, but he did nothing about the gaps in his own back line which were exploited by each team they faced.

Serbia finished their campaign with one of the worst defences in Qatar having conceded eight goals -- more than their previous two World Cups combined.

They were second only to Costa Rica who shipped in 11 -- which included seven in one game against Spain.

Off the pitch, a viral image of a flag which showed Kosovo as part of their country allegedly hung in the dressing room during their match with Brazil also put Serbia in the spotlight.

At their last two World Cups in 2010 and 2018, Serbia won at least one match but they go home from Qatar without a single win.

Although the team had been criticised back home, Stojkovic said he did not read the news and did not even bother paying attention to any of it.

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