

## Son apologises after South Korea’s meek exit

AFP, Doha

Son Heung-min apologised after his South Korean side exited the World Cup following a sobering 4-1 defeat to favourites Brazil in the last 16 in Qatar.

The captain and talisman was powerless as Brazil scored four times in the first half on Monday, before Paik Seung-ho netted a 76th-minute consolation for the outclassed Koreans.

South Korea have still never won a World Cup knockout tie outside of their home country.

“I can only apologise to our fans for not living up to their expectations,” said the 30-year-old Tottenham forward, who played in a mask in Qatar following facial surgery last month.

“We did our best but I think we played a very difficult game,” he told TV reporters.

“Still, there is no doubt that all the players battled proudly, devoted themselves and worked hard to get this far.

“The players and staff really did their best to prepare for this match, so I hope you understand.”



South Korea coach Paulo Bento announced in the immediate aftermath of the heavy defeat that he would not be staying on, a decision he said was made in September.

The 53-year-old former Portugal international had been in charge since 2018.

Son, who failed to score at the tournament and showed only fleeting glimpses of his best form, said he was sorry to see the boss go.

“I never once had any doubt about the style of football he pursued,” Son told Korean media in a reference to critics, who said Bento was too cautious at times.

“A lot of people had reservations about it but they all cheered for us when we played well at the World Cup here. We were able to execute things we’d worked on for the last four years.”

“It’s really sad to see him go,” Son added.



## Relentless Mbappe, poised Giroud AGE GAP NO FACTOR FOR FRANCE DUO

REUTERS, Doha

Thirteen years separate France strikers Kylian Mbappe and Olivier Giroud but their devastating double act in the 3-1 last-16 defeat of Poland and their overall showing so far at the World Cup showed the age gap is no barrier to a flourishing relationship.

Giroud, at 36, brings experience and guile to France’s attack, while Mbappe, 23, is blessed with pace so explosive that the screens at the Al Thumama Stadium showed him hitting a top of speed of 35 kph (22 mph) as he tormented Poland’s defence.

It was not supposed to be this way in Qatar. Giroud looked set for a secondary role for the World Cup holders until the team’s number one centre forward Karim Benzema pulled out with an injury on the eve of the tournament.

Mbappe and Benzema have forged a promising partnership for France in the past but the young PSG striker has said previously that Giroud’s approach to attack probably suited him better.

That understanding was clear for all to see as Poland were cut apart by France’s strikers.

A defence-splitting pass by Mbappe set up Giroud to break the deadlock - and become France’s all-time top goalscorer - in the 44th minute of the mismatch, with Poland chasing shadows for most of it.

The goal also made Giroud - at 36 years and 65 days old - the oldest scorer in a World Cup knockout match since Cameroon’s Roger Milla against Colombia in 1990 in a last-16 game.

“Giroud is an incredible player, there are many who say it now,” French coach Didier Deschamps told reporters. “He was much criticised but Olivier has the mindset to fight. When he is not

decisive, he is so useful to the team but like any centre forward, he prefers the collective victory, but winning with this goal-scoring record, it’s not nothing.”

Giroud, who plays for AC Milan after making his name in England with Arsenal and Chelsea, returned the favour when it was Mbappe’s turn to get on the scoresheet.

He launched a 74th-minute counter-attack that ended with the France number 10 using all his power to hammer a shot past Wojciech Szczesny in Poland’s goal.

With Giroud substituted, Mbappe went on to claim his second goal, curling a shot into the top corner in added time before Robert Lewandowski claimed a penalty consolation goal for Poland.

The brace meant Mbappe became the youngest to reach five knockout-stage goals at a World Cup since Brazil great Pele in 1958, when he was 17.

While France’s defence showed it was far from impregnable at times, their quarterfinal opponents England will not have missed how Ousmane Dembele, Antoine Griezmann and substitute Marcus Thuram also dazzled.

The way France piled forward in numbers from the start of Sunday’s match drew a sharp contrast with Poland’s approach as Lewandowski, one of the world’s most prolific strikers, was left to play a lone role. He had publicly called on Poland coach Czeslaw Michniewicz last year to give him a strike partner.

Meanwhile, between them, Mbappe and Giroud have scored eight of France’s nine goal so far in the tournament, and it doesn’t seem it will stop there with Les Blues bidding to be the first team to defend the title since Brazil in 1962.



## Spirit of samba comes alive

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

Richarlison’s seal dribble and Neymar’s nifty feet eventually culminated in samba celebrations -- Brazil’s jogo bonito was on display in Qatar on Tuesday at Stadium 974 where the Selecao barely left any tricks up the sleeve to entertain the crowd on way to making it to the quarterfinal by crushing South Korea 4-1.

Brazil were at their magical best on a night when they looked to be cut from a very different cloth.

With a host of legendary figures like Cafu, Roberto Carlos, and Ronaldo, all of whom have dazzled in the canary yellow, watching on from the stands and the motivation transferred from the greatest protagonist in Brazil’s footballing folklore, a hospitalised Pele, Tite’s troops rose to the occasion.

Buoyed by the return of their current starman Neymar, Brazil put on a show with scintillating skill, technique, guile, and a bag full of party tricks as they went 4-0 up at halftime without even breaking a sweat, rolling back the years to bring the samba spirit that doesn’t show up often in the modern era.

It almost seemed as if the carefree Samba boys were just enjoying a game of football in the streets of Rio.

The three group-stage matches, despite the dominance shown by Tite’s men, still left a lot to be desired, especially by their fans, who always



expect more than just wins from a Brazil game. That yearning was finally sated.

Tite’s men, in their quest for the Hexa, stuttered against Cameroon after fielding a second string side. But at the business end of the tournament, the 61-year-old coach welcomed a plethora of first-team starters as he left nothing to chance against South Korea. Returnees Richarlison, Neymar, Lucas Paqueta and Vinicius Jr all got their names on the scoresheet with the latter opening the floodgates just seven minutes into the game.

Neymar converted a penalty to take his team 2-0 up. For Brazil’s third, Richarlison, who started the move, knocked the ball three times with his head before rolling it to Marquinhos, who squared it to Thiago Silva, while the striker kept on with his run. The final pass from the Brazil skipper put Richarlison through as he rolled it past the South Korean goalkeeper to complete one of the sleekest goals of the tournament which could only be topped by the worldie he produced against Serbia.

And by the time Paqueta darted in the box to volley home their fourth goal, South Korea knew there was no way back for them in the game.

Neymar and Co produced one of the most complete performances of the tournament so far. The tag of favourites never weighed down the five-time World Champions, but perhaps they needed such a Brazil-esque display to justify the tag after a meek group stage performance.

## Asian sides ‘catching up quickly’ with heavyweights

REUTERS, Doha

Asia will again be unrepresented in the World Cup quarterfinals but several upset wins and vibrant displays have many in the continent feeling that the gap to the best teams is closing.

The first World Cup in the Arab world was also the second held entirely on the globe’s most populous continent and heavyweights Argentina, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Denmark all tasted defeat at the hands of Asian confederation teams.

Japan, South Korea and Australia made it out of the group stage for a record representation in the last 16 but none were able to emulate the 2002 Taegeuk Warriors and the North Korean side of 1966 by making the quarterfinals.

They did not bow out meekly, though, with Australia taking Argentina down to the wire in a 2-1 defeat, Japan losing on penalties to Croatia after a 1-1 draw, and South Korea battling until the end despite conceding four early goals to Brazil.

“Brazil deserved to win ... but it has been extraordinary what has happened with Korean football over



the last four years,” South Korea coach Paulo Bento said after the 4-1 defeat.

“We were very bold in how we approached the game today - even though we were low on energy we were loyal to our style to the end and I was very proud of that.”

The one major disappointment was the performance of host nation and Asian champions Qatar, who looked out of their depth throughout

and were the only one of the six teams from the confederation to fail to register a win.

Their neighbours Saudi Arabia stood the football world on its head, however, when they came from behind to beat Lionel Messi’s Argentina 2-1 in their opening match in what statisticians Gracenote credited as the biggest shock in World Cup history.

The Saudis were unable to



capitalise on that win and departed after the group stage following two losses but will turn their attention to the next Asian Cup with renewed confidence.

Iran, perhaps distracted by the turmoil of anti-government protests back home, were pummeled 6-2 by England in their opener but restored credibility with a 2-0 win over Wales before bowing out in a 1-0 loss to the United States.

It was left to East Asian sides Japan and South Korea and southerly appendage Australia, who switched from the Oceania confederation in 2006, to fly the Asian flag in the knockout rounds.

Japan stunned both Germany and Spain 2-1 to top a tough group even after they suffered a 1-0 shock themselves at the hands of Costa Rica.

“Our victories over Spain and

Germany, two of the top teams in the world, is something that gives us a great confidence,” said Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu.

“Of course, there are many things that we still have to learn, but we can win on the world stage. All the people that are involved in football in Asia as well as Japan I think can share our happiness.”

South Korea’s never-say-die attitude earned them a last-gasp 2-1 win over Cristiano Ronaldo’s Portugal that sealed their place in the last 16, Hwang Hee-chan striking in stoppage time to secure a famous win.

Of all the success for the Asian confederation sides, Australia progressing to the last 16 was perhaps the most surprising given they had scraped into the tournament via two play-offs.

Graham Arnold’s unheralded squad rebounded from a 4-1 loss to France to beat both Tunisia and Denmark 1-0 and reach the knockout stages for only the second time.

“It’s great for Asia,” said Arnold. “I do believe that Asian football is getting stronger and stronger and stronger, and we’re catching up quickly.”