



The roadmap for the 2026 FIFA World Cup -- the biggest yet, with 48 nations -- took shape yesterday against a backdrop of tears, joy, and historic feats. [Anti-clockwise] For Italy, it was shock and disbelief as Gennaro Gattuso's men suffered an agonising 4-1 penalty shootout defeat to Bosnia and Herzegovina in their playoff final, following a 1-1 draw in Zenica. The result means Italy -- reduced to 10 men after defender Alessandro Bastoni was sent off late in the first half -- will miss a third straight World Cup while Bosnia return to the event for the first time since 2014. Meanwhile, the Democratic Republic of Congo defeated Jamaica 1-0 at home with an extra-time winner from former England Under-21 international Axel Tuanzebe in their inter-confederation playoff final, securing their first World Cup appearance in 52 years, when the country was known as Zaire. In Mexico's Monterrey, Iraq players celebrated their return to the quadrennial event after a 40-year absence by claiming the final spot with a 2-1 win over Bolivia. Turkiye also returned after a 22-year gap, while Sweden (first time since 2018) and Czechia (first time since 2006) also booked their places in the tournament.

PHOTO: AFP/FIG

'UNACCEPTABLE DISGRACE' Italy miss third straight World Cup

STAR SPORTS DESK

Italy's World Cup nightmare deepened on Tuesday as the four-time champions crashed out in the playoffs once again, falling 4-1 on penalties to Bosnia and Herzegovina after a 1-1 draw -- a result that has sparked nationwide outrage and renewed calls for sweeping reform.

The Azzurri looked on course early when Moise Kean fired them ahead in the 15th minute, but the match turned just before halftime when Alessandro Bastoni was sent off for a last-man tackle. Reduced to 10 men, Italy struggled to maintain control, and Haris Tabakovic struck an equaliser 11 minutes from time to force penalties.

Misses from Pio Esposito and Bryan Cristante proved costly as Bosnia converted all their spot-kicks, with 18-year-old Kerim Alajbegovic once again showing composure under pressure.

The defeat means Italy will miss a third consecutive World Cup, extending an astonishing decline for a nation that last lifted the trophy in 2006 and has not played a knockout match at the tournament since.

Head coach Gennaro Gattuso cut an emotional figure after the match. "Today the boys didn't deserve a beating like this," he told RAI. "We were left with 10 players, we had three decent chances and

Group A
Mexico
South Korea
South Africa
Czechia

Group D
USA
Australia
Paraguay
Turkey

Group G
Belgium
Iran
Egypt
New Zealand

Group J
Argentina
Austria
Algeria
Jordan

Group B
Canada
Switzerland
Qatar
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Group E
Germany
Ecuador
Ivory Coast
Curacao

Group H
Spain
Uruguay
Saudi Arabia
Cape Verde

Group K
Portugal
Colombia
Uzbekistan
DR Congo

Group C
Brazil
Morocco
Scotland
Haiti

Group F
Netherlands
Japan
Tunisia
Sweden

Group I
France
Senegal
Norway
Iraq

Group L
England
Croatia
Panama
Ghana

EUROPEAN PLAYOFFS
Bosnia and Herzegovina 1-1 Italy (Bosnia win 4-1 on penalties)
Sweden 3-2 Poland
Kosovo 0-1 Turkey

Czechia 2-2 Denmark (Czechia win 3-1 on penalties)

INTERCONTINENTAL PLAYOFFS
DR Congo 1-0 Jamaica
Iraq 2-1 Bolivia



they barely troubled us. I'm sorry... I'm proud of my boys."

But pride offered little consolation back home.

Italy woke up to fury and disbelief, with Corriere della Sera branding it "the World Cup curse," while La Gazzetta dello Sport and Corriere dello Sport, the country's two main sports newspapers declared: "We're all staying at home." Fans echoed that frustration.

"Everything went badly from the start," said Rome supporter Davide Caldareta. "The team wasn't good... honestly, I'm shocked."

The backlash quickly turned political. Italy's Sports Minister Andrea Abodi called for change at the top, saying, "Italian football needs to be rebuilt from the ground up," while members of the ruling coalition demanded the resignation of federation president Gabriele Gravina, whose future will be discussed at a board meeting next week.

"It is an unacceptable disgrace," the League Party, a member of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's coalition, wrote on Instagram.

Even legends weighed in. "Today's results are the consequence of our attitude from 20 years ago," said Gianluigi Buffon, pointing to a failure to evolve beyond past greats.

SAFF U-20 C'SHIP

Manik header seals final berth

SPORTS REPORTER

A first-half header from Mohammad Manik sent Bangladesh into the SAFF U-20 Championship final with a 1-0 win over Nepal in the first semifinal at the National Stadium in Male yesterday.

The victory secured Bangladesh's sixth final appearance, barring the 2023 edition. The men in red and green dominated early, then withstood sustained second-half pressure from former champions Nepal.

With head coach Mark Cox suspended, assistant coach Atiqur Rahman Meshu led the side from the touchline. Bangladesh began brightly, creating early chances but scored a solitary goal.



Manik scored in the 11th minute, heading home from a precise lob by Murshed Ali. US-based forward Ronan Sullivan thought he had doubled the lead shortly after, but it was ruled out for offside.

Nepal pressed for an equaliser in the second half, but Bangladesh's defence held firm. Yousuf Ali blocked a powerful strike from substitute Anubhab Puri in the 90th minute.

Bangladesh had late chances to seal the game, with Sumon Soren's flick from a Declan Sullivan cross drifting wide, and Ronan's close-range effort from another Declan pass saved by Bhote.

Bangladesh held on to book a place in the final on April 3 against either India or Bhutan.

70 DAYS TO GO



The day Brazil owned the cup

At the 1970 edition, Brazil won the World Cup for a third time to claim the Jules Rimet Trophy permanently. In the final at the Azteca Stadium in Mexico, they thrashed Italy 4-1. Pele, Gerson, Jairzinho, and Carlos Alberto scored for the Selecao, while Roberto Boninsegna netted the Azzurri's lone goal.

** Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Seaman and the 42-yard illusion.'

Hamza hails progress after 'hard lesson'

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's talisman Hamza Choudhury struck a tone of cautious optimism after Tuesday's 1-0 defeat to Singapore, framing the end of their AFC Asian Cup qualifying campaign as a necessary "hard lesson" for a side he believes have progressed by "leaps and bounds" over the past year.

"It's a big step forward," Hamza told reporters at Changi Airport. "To come to Singapore, who have already qualified, and play the kind of football we did is something we should be proud of. It puts us in good stead



for the next campaign."

He acknowledged the immediate sting felt within the squad and by head coach Javier Cabrera, but insisted that a closer look at the performances would reflect a team beginning to establish themselves on the continental stage.

"Of course, we wanted to qualify, but with these hard lessons everyone becomes stronger. There's disappointment, but when we look back at the games, we'll see how much better we've become as a team."

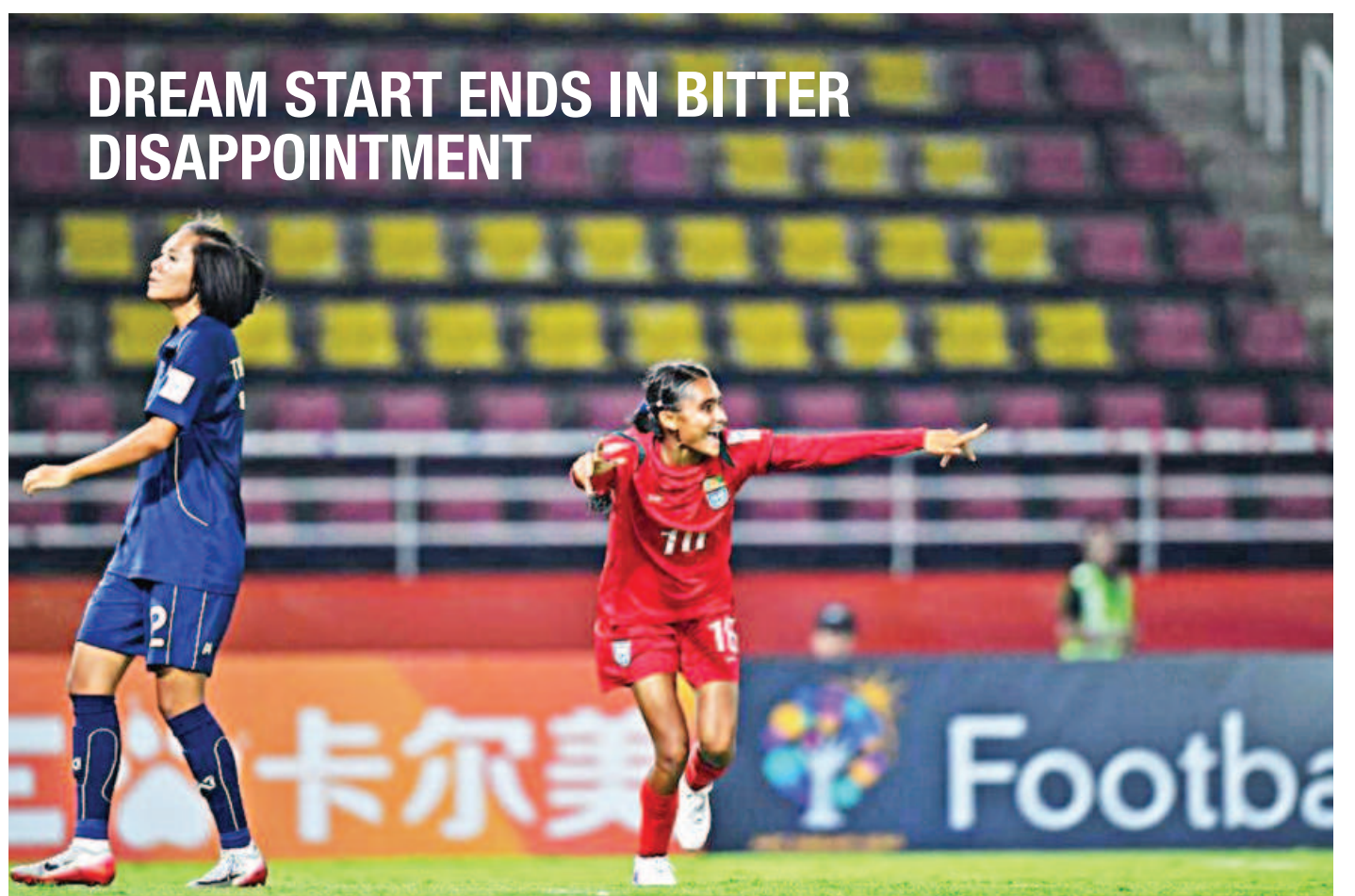
Reflecting on his first year in international football, the 28-year-old described his experience with Bangladesh as deeply fulfilling. "It's amazing -- honestly, the best thing I've done," he said.

The Leicester City midfielder also reserved special praise for Bangladesh's travelling support, who turned out in significant numbers at the National Stadium in Kallang and, at times, drowned out the home crowd.

"I think they're the best fans in the world. For them to travel and spend their hard-earned money to support us like that -- even when we haven't qualified -- is second to none. We're so grateful."

Looking ahead, Hamza pointed to a run of summer friendlies before the next competitive window in September, with expectations within the camp now shifting.

"We expect to win now. Within the country and within ourselves, we've put that expectation on us after some of our displays."



Goal-machine Mosammat Sagorika handed Bangladesh a dream start to their maiden AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup campaign against Thailand in Bangkok yesterday, striking in the 36th and 54th minutes. However, two rash challenges by Bangladesh defenders inside the box in the 68th and 74th minutes led to penalties, allowing the hosts to seize control. Riding that momentum, Thailand netted a decisive third goal in the 78th minute, leaving Bangladesh's historic debut to end in bitter disappointment.

PHOTO: AFP