

Canada, S Africa enter uncharted territory



PHOTO: REUTERS

AGENCIES

Co-hosts Canada and South Africa will meet tonight in the first of the World Cup last-32 ties, with both nations reaching the knockout stage for the first time in their histories.

Canada have advanced beyond the group stage for the first time in three World Cup appearances, while South Africa achieved the feat at the fourth attempt after a remarkable turnaround in form.

The South Africans began the tournament poorly, drawing criticism after a defensive display against Mexico in the opening match. Coach Hugo Broos switched to a more attacking approach against the Czech Republic, earning a draw, before his side produced their best performance against South Korea.

Thapelo Maseko's 63rd-minute winner secured a 1-0 victory and second place in Group A behind Mexico.

"I'm very proud of the performance of my team," said Broos. "I think we gave an answer to all those big mouths of the last few weeks."

Canada's campaign included a 6-0 thrashing of Qatar -- their first-ever World Cup victory -- along with a draw against Bosnia and Herzegovina and a defeat to Switzerland. They finished runners-up in Group B and missed out on top spot, which would have allowed them to remain in Vancouver.

The hosts are hopeful their supporters will travel south for the knockout clash.

"We're sorry we have to leave you. But you don't have to leave us," the team posted on social media.

Canada's biggest concern remains the fitness of captain Alphonso Davies, who has yet to feature in the tournament because of injury. However, coach Jesse Marsch indicated the Bayern Munich star could return on Sunday.

"Having our captain back, our best player back, can have a big impact physically, football-wise and mentally," Marsch said.



Midfielder Ismael Kone is out with a broken leg suffered against Qatar, while Stephen Eustaquio and defender Moise Bombito are fitness doubts.

South Africa will welcome back midfielder Teboho Mokoena from suspension, but veteran playmaker Themba Zwane will serve the final match of a three-game ban following his red card against Mexico.

Bielsa accepts blame for catastrophic campaign

AFP, Guadalajara

Marcelo Bielsa said Uruguay deserved more from all three of their World Cup games, but accepted the critics that will come his way after the two-time winners crashed out in the group stage.

Goalkeeper Fernando Muslera's mistake condemned Bielsa's side to an early exit in a 1-0 defeat to Spain on Friday after disappointing draws against Cape Verde and Saudi Arabia.

"We deserved to get seven points and got two," said Bielsa.

"We failed to achieve an acceptable ratio between taking the chances we created and the relationship between the goals we conceded and the role our opponents played in scoring them, was also poor. They were avoidable goals."

"Journalists and fans of Uruguayan football legitimately want to pin the blame on me. I'm the person responsible and I have to accept it."

Muslera had also been at fault for both Cape Verde's goals in a 2-2 draw and Bielsa said the decision to replace the 40-year-old at half-time had been taken by the player.

Bielsa also controversially substituted Real Madrid's Federico Valverde on the hour mark.

"Muslera decided to come off at half-time, and I replaced Valverde with Federico Vinas because I wanted to add a more physical presence to the attack."

Bielsa conceded the decision to keep faith with Muslera had backfired but explained his thinking in sticking by one of Uruguay's heroes in a run to the semi-finals of the 2010 World Cup.

"I cannot deny or dispute the assessment of Muslera's performance but, at the same time, I believe he is a goalkeeper who was coming off a magnificent year and is a player with tremendous personality and character," added the Argentine coach.

"I certainly share the assessment you are making, but the decision I took was not to undermine Muslera's confidence, but rather to maintain it."



PHOTO: REUTERS

Japan 'really ready' to face Brazil

AGENCIES

Japan are no longer just participants on football's biggest stage. The Samurai Blue are now fully equipped to challenge the world's elite. Ahead of Monday's blockbuster knockout meeting with Brazil, the narrative surrounding the team has completely shifted from plucky underdogs to genuine contenders.

Former Brazil star and ex-Japan coach Zico believes this current generation has completely shattered the fear factor that used to hold them back. Having monitored their steady evolution, the legendary playmaker insists the Asian powerhouse is completely unfazed by the status of traditional giants.

"Over the past few years, they have beaten Brazil, Germany, Spain and England," Zico told FIFA.

"They really are ready for whatever comes their way."

This maturity stems from a massive influx of talent playing at the very highest level of club football. Since making their World Cup debut in 1998, Japan have qualified for every edition, but their modern squad possesses a



distinct European pedigree.

"Japan are at a more competitive level now," Zico said.

"Their players have been heading to Europe, just like Brazilian and South American players did. Of their 26 players at the World Cup, 23 play in Europe and they're getting to play in the Bundesliga, in Serie A, in the Premier League."

That experience has turned Japan into a refined unit that "play proper football." At Qatar 2022, they topped

their group with memorable victories over Germany and Spain before a heartbreaking penalty shootout defeat to Croatia, following a similarly dramatic 3-2 exit against Belgium in 2018.

"At each of the last two tournaments Japan reached the knockout stage but fell short of the quarter-finals," Zico noted.

"That shows how far Japan have come. They are prepared to face anyone."



Senegal's Ismaila Sarr tries to manoeuvre the ball past a host of Iraq players during their FIFA World Cup 2026 Group I match at Toronto Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Senegal's quiet man for the big occasions

REUTERS, Toronto

Ismaila Sarr's quiet dedication finally got its loudest moment on Friday, as the striker became Senegal's all-time leading scorer at the World Cup in a 5-0 pounding of Iraq and his teammates could not have been prouder.

Sarr's fourth World Cup goal, scored just before the hour mark, moved him past the late Papa Bouba Diop as his country's record marksman at the tournament.

Those who share a dressing room with him say the milestone was richly deserved.

"He really, really deserves it," said midfielder Idrissa Gueye. "Yeah, he puts everything into what he does."

The 28-year-old Sarr had drawn level with Diop four days earlier with a brace against

Norway, which made him the first Senegalese player to score at two World Cups.

Defender Moussa Niakhate offered a telling portrait of a man who lets his football do the talking.

"He's an inspiration," said Niakhate. "He's like someone who is really shy, really quiet, but the most important thing is what you do on the pitch, and on the pitch he is not shy. He just shows what he can do, always gives his best for the country."

Goalkeeper Mory Diaw, deputising for the injured Edouard Mendy, echoed the sentiment.

"He deserves it because he's a very good player," said Diaw. "Every day, he works a lot, so he deserves this goal, and I hope for more for him."

Tigers out to hit top form in Zim Test

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will take on Zimbabwe in a one-off Test at the Harare Sports Club today, heading into the contest on the back of an impressive run in the red-ball format, having whitewashed both Ireland and Pakistan in recent home Test series.

Although the fixture is not part of the ICC World Test Championship, it will serve as important preparation for Bangladesh ahead of two challenging away Test series against Australia and South Africa later this year. Despite making a few changes to their bowling attack, the Tigers have retained the batting core.

Bangladesh have dominated Zimbabwe in Test cricket over the past 12 years, winning eight of their last 10 meetings. However, the Chevrons have shown they can still spring a surprise, as they did in the previous series when they beat Bangladesh in Sylhet before the visitors levelled it in Mirpur.

Zimbabwe also arrive with confidence after beating Afghanistan in a one-off Test in October last year.

Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said the side have "adjusted well to the conditions" and feel "fully prepared for the match".

"Everyone is confident because we have played good cricket in the last few series," Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said on Saturday. "We have a few important away series coming up after this. It is important how well we perform here... Our target is to play as well as we can."

On the other camp, left-arm pacer Richard Ngarava is set to captain Zimbabwe in a Test for the first time. The hosts have also included several in-form players in their squad but will be without Sikandar Raza, who has been granted permission to fulfil his commitments with Worcestershire in the remainder of the 2026 Vitality Blast in England.

