



BEIJING: Zhang Shuai of China celebrates after defeating Simona Halep of Romania during the women's singles match of the China Open tennis tournament. — AP

## HOME HERO ZHANG STUNS HALEP TO REACH CHINA OPEN QUARTERS

BEIJING: Home hero Zhang Shuai cruised past Simona Halep to book a quarter final place at the China Open yesterday in rain-hit Beijing. Zhang overpowered fifth-ranked Halep in less than an hour, beating her 6-0, 6-3 to delight the home crowd in the Chinese capital.

It was a day of upsets as Elina Svitolina ousted top seed Angelique Kerber, scuppering her plans of a 12th quarter-final this season, and intermittent rain interrupted-and then suspended-play on the open-air outer courts. It was the Ukrainian's second win this year over a world number one after she denied Serena Williams a fifth Olympic gold medal with a straight set win in the third round in Rio.

In the roofed National Stadium, the home fans' cheers carried Zhang into the quarter finals for the first time in seven attempts, dropping just three games en route. The 27-year-old began the year with a first-round upset of Halep at the Australian Open-her first win in a Grand Slam main draw, which left her in tears. But there were no tears

yesterday-just huge smiles and an ecstatic audience.

Meanwhile, 19th-ranked Svitolina beat Kerber-who ascended to the top of the rankings at the US Open, the same week she also claimed her second Grand Slam crown-with a 6-3, 7-5 win. "When they announce (the names at the start of the march) you have this weird feeling because you realize you're playing against world number one", Svitolina said after the match. "I try to really don't think about it. If I think too much, I lose my way," she added.

### 'Nothing for free'

Kerber, who had her right thigh taped during the match, had a break lead in each set but appeared glued to the baseline and was unable to take control. "I know that I have to move very well when I play my game, and I couldn't play my game like I play," Kerber told reporters. The German still plans to play in Hong Kong next week as she chases points to end the year atop the rankings-but her right leg may alter her plans.

"Still it's in my schedule to play Hong Kong. It's right after the match, so I don't know exactly with my leg or whatever. But it's still in my schedule," she said. Briton Johanna Konta scored her first ever win over US Open finalist Karolina Pliskova in a three set tie break, 6-1, 3-6, 7-6 (7/2). With a victory over the sixth-ranked Czech, Konta-currently at number 14 moves closer to breaking into the top ten for the first time. The win also moves the 25-year-old into tenth position in the race for the eight-player WTA Final in Singapore, meaning she could play if one of the eight dropped out.

But if fellow quarter-finalist Petra Kvitova, currently 12th in the race, continues her stellar Asian run, the Briton could be nudged out. Agnieszka Radwanska put friendship aside to secure her second consecutive win over former number one Caroline Wozniacki in the pair's third meeting in as many weeks. Third-ranked Radwanska booked her quarter-final spot on the third match point with a dash to the net to return a drop shot from the Dane. — AFP

## SMITH DRAMA A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR BLACKS

DURBAN: With no other rugby team coming close to unsettling New Zealand, the drama and distraction of scrumhalf Aaron Smith's suspension appears to be the biggest obstacle between the All Blacks and another supremely dominant season. Even then, it's unlikely that the incident and Smith's absence for the world champion's final test of the Rugby Championship in South Africa - when the All Blacks could equal the record for consecutive wins - will derail one of the most impressive teams in world sport and its 16-game streak.

On the field, TJ Perenara provides such a strong backup at No. 9 that New Zealand won't be any weaker without Smith. And off the field, an unshakeable team culture that has created a consistent level of excellence since the first of back-to-back World Cup wins in 2011 means it's hard to see any dip in focus. Former South Africa coach Heyneke Meyer, whose team lost to New Zealand in last year's World Cup semifinals, told South African media this week that it was what went on behind the scenes with the All Blacks that made them the best.

"What people don't understand," Meyer said, "is that whatever happens off the field translates directly into what happens on it. This is where the All Blacks are ahead of the rest." Meyer described how the stars of the All Blacks, rugby's most famous team, weren't above cleaning the dressing room. "They've got an unbelievable team culture where senior players sweep the dressing room. It's all about the team and there are no prima donnas," Meyer said. That made Smith's indiscretion last month - entering a disabled toilet with a woman while he was traveling with the team - shocking to New Zealanders. It's such a big deal that Prime Minister John Key weighed in, saying Smith had let himself and the team down.

### Team ethic

The All Blacks put so much trust in their team ethic, an ethic now under scrutiny because of Smith, that a group of senior players were part of the decision to suspend him for tomorrow's game against the Springboks in Durban. "The leadership group met and were unanimous in the fact that behavior was not acceptable," said Steve Hansen, the thick-set, straight-talking head coach who has been with the All Blacks' staff for 12 years. Smith's actions also prompted recollections in New Zealand of the last and only other time an All Black left a tour for disciplinary reasons: Keith Murdoch was sent home from Wales in 1972 for punching a security guard after he was refused entry to a closed bar.

The Smith controversy broke as New Zealand's squad arrived in South Africa after a member of the public complained belatedly about the airport incident, and Smith asked to be allowed to go home. He'll face a misconduct hearing, and a media storm, back in New Zealand. In Durban, the challenge for the rest of the All Blacks is to charge through the distraction and on to a record-equaling 17th test win in top-tier rugby, and give the game's most celebrated team a chance at another accomplishment, the outright world record, at home against Australia in two weeks. — AP

## ROSBERG WARY OF HAMILTON BACKLASH

SUZUKA: Nico Rosberg is bracing himself for a backlash from wounded Mercedes team-mate Lewis Hamilton after seizing the initiative in the Formula One title race. Hamilton, the reigning world champion, looked to be cruising to victory in Malaysia last weekend before his engine blew up as Rosberg's battling third-place finish allowed the German to open a 23-point lead with five races left. Rosberg, whose feud with Hamilton has threatened to boil over in previous years, predicted yesterday that Hamilton would come back strong in the championship run-in.

"I don't draw encouragement from (Hamilton's troubles)," insisted Rosberg, who threw away a 43-point advantage earlier this season. I don't really think too much about Lewis's misfortune, I think

more about my situation. "Anyways I know that Lewis, when he has difficulties like that, will come back fully-motivated," he added. "So it's not really encouraging to know that he's going to come back as strong as ever." In stark contrast to Hamilton, who angrily tore into Mercedes after his third engine failure of the season in Sepang, Rosberg is enjoying a purple patch of form, having won three races in a row before Malaysia.

"I really learnt to manage my energies and know where not to waste energies in rubbish stuff," said Rosberg. "There for sure I've made big progress. It's important to me and I really like to take that approach." Asked to elaborate, he smiled: "The rubbish stuff would be reading the news, for example, or

playing computer games, or going partying until five in the morning." It was not clear if that remark was a sly dig at Hamilton and his elaborate lifestyle, but Rosberg is in the form of his life and a first-ever victory in Suzuka this weekend would severely dent Hamilton's title hopes.

Rosberg played down concerns that technical problems could decide the championship race. "I'm not worried because I have learnt to put my energy into things that I can influence-and that's something I definitely can't influence," said the 31-year-old, who finished second behind Hamilton last year after starting on pole. "I also have all the trust in the team," added Rosberg, who suffered an ERS (energy recovery system) problem in the 2014 title decider in Abu Dhabi. — AFP