



**SAITAMA:** Japanese forward Shinji Okazaki (L) fights for the ball with Iraqi defender Ahmed Ibrahim (R) during the 2018 World Cup football qualifying match between Japan and Iraq. — AFP

## YAMAGUCHI RESCUES JAPAN AGAINST IRAQ AS SYRIA SLAM CHINA'S HOPES

**SAITAMA:** Substitute Hotaru Yamaguchi's 95th-minute winner rescued Japan and their stuttering World Cup qualifying campaign as they escaped with a 2-1 victory over Iraq yesterday. The Blue Samurai were headed for an ignominious draw in Saitama when Yamaguchi smashed a loose ball from a corner through a forest of legs and into the Iraqi goal. The result gave Japan their second win in three final-round qualifiers and boosted under-fire coach Vahid Halilhodzic, who has endured calls for his resignation and has suffered reported player unrest.

It also lifts Japan's hopes of reaching a sixth straight World Cup at Russia 2018 as they draw temporarily level on points with Group B pace-setters Australia and Saudi Arabia, who face each other later. As Borussia Dortmund forward Shinji Kagawa watched from the bench, Japan dominated the early possession but rarely threatened, with Hiroshi Kiyotake's 11th-minute piledriver their closest sight of goal.

But Genki Haraguchi put the hosts ahead with a brilliant piece of skill as he flicked Kiyotake's cross through his legs and beneath the diving body of goalkeeper Mohammed Hameed on 26 minutes. AC Milan's Keisuke Honda should have made it 2-0 a minute later but he hit his close-range half-volley straight at the busy Hameed. Iraq nearly equalised in first-half injury-time but Alaa Abdul-Zahra's volley, from a sweeping ball that dropped over his head, bounced kindly for Japan 'keeper Shusaku Nishikawa.

However, Iraq rocked the four-time

Asian champions on 60 minutes when Saad Luaibi nodded Ahmed Yaseen's free kick just inside the post and past the diving Nishikawa. Not content with a draw, Iraq poured forward in search of a shock victory, but it was Honda who very nearly grabbed the clincher when his header came off the post in the 80th minute. And as six minutes of injury-time ticked away, Hiyotake's cross rebounded to 67th-minute substitute Yamaguchi, who buried the winner to send the stadium into ecstasy. The top two sides from two groups of six book their ticket to Russia, while the two third-placed teams go into a play-off series.

### Syria's rocks China's World Cup hopes

Syria dented China's bid to reach a second World Cup when they pulled off a stunning 1-0 qualifying upset yesterday. Mahmoud Al-Mawas's breakaway goal in the 54th minute settled a gritty game in Xian which left China stranded on one point from their first three games in Group A. Seventy-eighth ranked China have ambitions of hosting and even winning a World Cup, but Al-Mawas dented their hopes of reaching the tournament for a second time at Russia 2018.

The bustling, bearded forward latched onto a long ball and prodded his first touch past on-rushing goalkeeper Gu Chao before controlling the bouncing ball into the net. Syria should have made the game safe in the 73rd minute but Omar Kharbin managed to miss an open goal from Al-Mawas's inviting cutback. Syria, despite playing

their home games at neutral venues because of the conflict in their country, now climb above China in Group A to draw level on four points with mighty Iran, who play Uzbekistan later.

### Super Son fires Korea past Qatar

In-form Tottenham Hotspur forward Son Heung-Min grabbed the winner as South Korea came from behind to beat Qatar 3-2 and take a step towards the 2018 Russia World Cup yesterday. After South Korea trailed 2-1 at half-time, the hosts levelled through Ji Dong-Won before Son extended his electric scoring run with the decisive strike on 58 minutes.

Uli Stielike's team saw out the last 24 minutes a man down after Hong Jeong-Ho was sent off, compounding a miserable evening for the defender after he gave away a penalty for Qatar's opener. While South Korea march on in the final qualifying round, Qatar look unlikely to reach their first World Cup before hosting it in 2022 as they remain pointless and bottom of Group A after three games.

South Korean captain Ki Sung-Yueng opened the scoring with a low shot that skipped past the diving Saad Al Sheeb after 11 minutes. But Qatar hit back and they won a penalty when Hong was booked for taking down Sebastian Soria. Captain Hassan Al Haydos stepped up and struck it past Kim Seung-Gyu. And the Gulf state wasn't done yet as Soria made it 2-1 just before half-time, flicking Rodrigo Tabata's cross past Kim Seung-Gyu. — AFP

## FIFA CHIEF 'OPEN' TO 48-TEAM WORLD CUP

**ZURICH:** FIFA president Gianni Infantino confirmed in an exclusive interview with AFP yesterday that he backs expanding the World Cup to 48 teams, giving "more of a chance to more teams". Infantino believes "a fundamental point" for an expanded finals would be to have it co-hosted "by several countries". He also declared himself "quite happy and confident for the future" of the scandal-tainted world governing body of football.

"Nobody is perfect, I am the last to be. But I don't steal, I don't profit, I don't cheat and I don't want to allow anyone in this organisation to do so," he said. Infantino, 46, succeeded the disgraced Sepp Blatter at the head of FIFA, and is determined to stamp his own authority on the job as president and on the sport's future. He had already suggested that he would be in favour of a 40-team World Cup, up from the current 32.

"We can consider a World Cup of 48 teams which would in fact be a 32-team format because we have seen that the ideal format is 32 teams," explained Infantino. "The idea would be that the best 16 teams in qualifying would qualify directly for the group phase." He confirmed that the 32 other teams would dispute a play-off round from which the winners would enter the next stage to join the other 16 countries. "This gives more chances for more teams. Furthermore, there would be no impact on the football calendar because these play-off matches would be played instead of friendlies before the World Cup.

### '16 finals'

"From the point of view of the promotion of football, there would be '16 finals' before the real start of the group phase, real matches taking place to determine the 16 teams." Swiss-Italian lawyer Infantino said that the projected increase to 48 teams "is certainly going to be discussed on October 13 and 14 when the next FIFA Council meets". "It's a project, it's an idea just as the World Cup with 40 teams is already on the table with groups of four or five teams. "We will certainly make a decision next year. We need to see what the impact for football at international level is going to be." The suggestion to widen the World Cup to 48 countries is bound to generate mixed emotions.

The 2016 European Championship in France, organized by Infantino's former employers at UEFA, featured 24 teams in a month-long tournament with just eight countries being eliminated at the end of the first stage.

### Watered down

Many argued that the format caused quality to be watered down; others were buoyed by seeing the likes of Wales make the semi-finals while Iceland stunned England on their way to the quarter-finals. Infantino believes a 48-team World Cup would represent "a high sporting level because from each play-off the best teams would qualify.

"People talk a lot about a decline in the standard but in my opinion the quality of the Euros was not less good, on the contrary. There were teams who you could not imagine could be so strong and the level was very high." Away from a new-look World Cup, Infantino told AFP that he is also committed to forging a fresh and clean FIFA after a series of corruption scandals since May 2015.

Infantino, who was the right-hand man of suspended Michel Platini in his UEFA career, believes he has the desire and the personnel to put FIFA's dark days behind them. He underlined the importance of the work "of the new general secretary Fatma Samoura, the development of women's football and the integration of former players like Zvonimir Boban, assistant secretary general, and Marco Van Basten in the area of technical development".

"I was elected on a program of reforms, I have a lot of belief in these reforms and their implementation" he added, hailing the measures taken in the context of "good governance and transparency in financial movements". "There is obviously still work to do but I am quite happy and confident about the future."

He also vowed yesterday that the 2026 World Cup bidding process will be free of the controversy that surrounded the selection of Russia as 2018 hosts and Qatar in 2022. Infantino was responding to a recent claim by US President Barack Obama that decisions on who hosts the Olympics and World Cups are corrupt. "I can't speak about the past. — Agencies