

## GERMANY HOPING TO FIX MISFIRING ATTACK

**BERLIN:** Germany host the Czech Republic tomorrow in the first of back-to-back World Cup 2018 qualifiers targeting two home wins despite missing main striker Mario Gomez. The Germans face the Czechs at Hamburg's sold-out Volksparkstadion Stadium, then face Northern Ireland four days later in Hanover looking to score, even with Wolfsburg's Gomez out with a glutes injury.

"This isn't just about picking up three points," team manager Oliver Bierhoff told magazine Kicker ahead of the Hamburg game. "We want to send out a clear message, in the direction of the 2018 World Cup." The main concern in the German camp is efficiency-finishing chances and converting pressure into goals — an old problem which re-emerged at the European championships when Germany lost to France in the semi-finals.

"We weren't efficient enough," said Bierhoff, reflecting on their Euro 2016 campaign. "The unbelievable potential which we have has to be used better and we must have more purpose in the final third of the pitch." Germany kicked off their Group C campaign with a 3-0 win over Norway in Oslo last month when Thomas Mueller netted twice.

With Gomez missing, the onus again falls on Bayern Munich's Mueller (two goals in nine club games) and Borussia Dortmund's Mario Goetze (one goal in five games) to hit the back of the net for their country. The Czech Republic won the last meeting, in October 2007, when they stunned the Germans in Munich with a 3-0 win in a Euro 2008 qualifier. Germany's head coach Joachim Loew is the only survivor in either squad from the defeat nine years ago.

The Czechs were held to a goalless draw by Northern Ireland in Prague at the start of September. Germany captain Manuel Neuer says both qualifiers will test die Mannschaft's attack, especially with Gomez injured. "It's a shame that Mario is out, he's a classic striker, but we have others who can step in and who are very flexible," said Neuer in Thursday's press conference in Duesseldorf. "We know how hard it will be to get goals against these teams, who are two of the strongest in the group. "We want to be first in the group and we're hoping for a good atmosphere on Saturday to help us get a good result." —AFP

## LONG WAIT SEEMS OVER FOR GAMEIRO

**PARIS:** It's been a long wait for Kevin Gameiro. But in the absence of the injured Olivier Giroud and with Karim Benzema still out of the France squad, the Atletico Madrid forward will finally get the opportunity to establish himself for good in Didier Deschamps' team. Gameiro, who joined Atletico in the offseason for a reported 30 million euros (\$34 million), is expected to start alongside Madrid teammate Antoine Griezmann when France takes on Bulgaria on Friday at the Stade de France in a World Cup qualifier. The European Championship runners-up, who were held to a 0-0 draw by Belarus in their Group A opener, will then travel to Amsterdam to play the Netherlands three days later. Griezmann, the top scorer at Euro 2016, is Deschamps' first choice, with Gameiro, Andre-Pierre Gignac, Anthony Martial and Nabil Fekir in competition to replace Giroud. The Arsenal striker, who has not started a game this season with his club, has been hindered by a toe injury while Benzema - who has not appeared for France since being charged with blackmail over a sex-tape scandal - still has no place in the plans of Deschamps, at least on a short-term basis.

The double absence of Benzema and Giroud is likely to benefit the 29-year-old Gameiro, who has strong credentials for his inclusion. His main asset is the promising relationship he has started to build with Griezmann at Atletico. Despite Fernando Torres' competition that has been limiting his playing time, Gameiro has scored three goals and delivered as many assists in nine appearances. "Individually, both of them are quality players and the fact that they are playing together with their club is a good thing," Deschamps said. "They can improve their chemistry."

Gameiro started his international career six years ago and was regularly called by previous France coach Laurent Blanc, until a friendly game against the United States in November 2011. The former Sevilla player then had to wait nearly five years before wearing the France jersey again.—AP



**LOME:** This file photo taken on June 9, 2013 shows a Togolese mascot taunting Cameroonian supporters before the 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifying football match Togo vs Cameroon at the Kegue Stadium in Lome. After two years without football championship due to an institutional crisis, Togolese fans are delighted to see the return of the sport. —AFP

# NIGERIA, SOUTH AFRICA SEEK REDEMPTION IN WORLD CUP

**JOHANNESBURG:** Africa Cup of Nations title-holders want to seek redemption by finishing two of the five African places at the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Five-time World Cup qualifiers Nigeria appear to have the tougher task after being placed with Algeria, Cameroon and Zambia, undoubtedly the 'group of death' among five four-team mini-leagues. But it is not going to be much easier for South Africa as they try to top a section including in-form Senegal, confident Burkina Faso and Cape Verde, a team ranked No. 1 in Africa for part of this year. Veteran Zambia goalkeeper Kennedy Mweene scoffs at media suggestions that the Chipolopolo (Copper Bullets) are in Group B just to make up the numbers. "When the media say you are no-hopers and certain to finish last, that motivates you," he warned Nigeria ahead of a Saturday showdown in central city Ndola. "Deep down, Algeria, Cameroon and Nigeria know it is not going to be easy playing against us. Being outsiders suits us just fine."

Caretaker Zambia coach Wedson Nyirenda rewarded ZESCO United for reaching the CAF Champions League semi-finals against the odds by including seven of their stars. Zambia also

failed to reach the 2017 Africa Cup, coming third in a group won by minnows Guinea-Bissau, so the pressure on Nyirenda is almost as much as that on opposite number Gernot Rohr.

"Do not forget that Zambia are a big team, too," stressed Germany-born Rohr, the recent successor to Sunday Oliseh in one of the hottest African coaching seats. "They were the 2012 Nations Cup winners. "The group is open, but I think the motivation of the Nigerian team is very high. Time is not on my side, but it is possible to build a very good team."

### Injuries hamper stars

Injuries have ruled out English Premier League pair Isaac Success and Victor Moses, but Manchester City teenage star Kelechi Iheanacho is poised to trouble Mweene. Cameroon will be up against it in Blida, a city where Algeria are virtually invincible and scored seven goals each against Ethiopia and Tanzania within the past 12 months.

No coach is more conscious of making a good start than Ephraim 'Shakes' Mashaba of South Africa, considered by most of the domestic media as lucky to still be in the post. A home draw with lowly Gambia followed by an away loss at football middleweights Mauritania left Bafana with a Cup of Nations mountain to scale, and they never looked like reaching the summit.

Poor finishing has been a long-running problem with former defender Mashaba surprisingly reluctant to accept responsibility. "We are brilliant when it

comes to building up, but have real problems in the final third of the pitch," he conceded. He has recalled beanpole Eleazar Rodgers from local outfit Wits, who can be lethal in the air and is also good at retaining possession in a lone-striker role.

Winger Gervinho will be the only survivor of the Ivory Coast 'golden generation' on show against Mali in Bouake after the recent retirement of talisman Yaya Toure and the resting of rusty Salomon Kalou. Ghana will lack injured midfielders Andre 'Dede' Ayew and Kwadwo Asamoah when they host Uganda in Tamale, but veteran striker Asamoah Gyan is fit to captain the Black Stars. Here are five facts ahead of 2018 World Cup Africa qualifying fixtures this weekend:

- Cameroon have qualified for the World Cup the most times from Africa with seven appearances since 1982.

- Of the 13 African countries who have played at the World Cup, only Angola and Togo failed to reach the group phase of the 2018 elimination competition.

- Not more than three of the five 2014 African qualifiers can reach Russia as Algeria, Cameroon and Nigeria have been grouped together and only the winners go to the finals.

- Ivory Coast and Ghana are hoping to equal the 1990-2002 record of

- Cameroon and qualify for four consecutive tournaments.

- Although Egypt have won the Africa Cup of Nations a record seven times, the last of only two World Cup appearances was 26 years ago. —AFP