

Vardy brings
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Portugal foiled by
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SANTA CLARA: Chile's Edson Puch celebrates after scoring the teams seventh goal against Mexico during the Copa America Centenario quarterfinal football match. — AFP

CHILE THRASH MEXICO 7-0 TO REACH SEMIS

SANTA CLARA: Eduardo Vargas scored four goals as holders Chile sent Mexico spinning to a historic 7-0 defeat to reach the semi-finals of the Copa America Centenario here Saturday. Hoffenheim forward Vargas completed a hat-trick in 13 devastating minutes either side of half-time to send Chile into a semi-final against Colombia in Chicago on Wednesday.

Vargas later dedicated his performance to his mother, who was earlier this week diagnosed with a heart problem in his homeland. "I'm very happy with the performance, I dedicate it to my mum and my family," Vargas said. "We started this tournament badly but we're getting stronger and stronger with every match," he added. The drubbing was Mexico's worst ever defeat in the

finals of a major tournament. Their previous biggest loss was a 6-0 rout by West Germany at the 1978 World Cup in Argentina. The rout was also only one goal away from equaling Mexico's heaviest ever defeat in any international, an 8-0 thrashing by England in London in 1961.

'A disgrace'

"I offer my sincere apologies to the Mexican fans, to all the Mexican people," Mexico coach Juan Carlos Osorio said afterwards. "What we saw today was a disgrace, an accident of football," he added. "Obviously there are more important things in the world than football, but that was a very poor display. "Chile had a great collective performance and extraordinary performance

from its stars," Osorio added. "But there is not seven goals difference between Chilean and Mexican football."

Vargas grabbed his fourth goal in the 74th minute to give Chile a 6-0 lead. But the punishment did not finish there with Edson Puch adding a seventh in the 88th minute for his second of the match. Chile, winners of last year's Copa America on home soil, had faced an intimidating atmosphere in front of a crowd of 70,547 people at the Levi's Stadium, home of the San Francisco 49ers.

But despite the overwhelmingly pro-Mexico crowd, Chile were quicker to settle, with Puch opening the scoring on 16 minutes when he steered in a rebound from Marcelo Diaz's shot after Guillermo Ochoa could only parry away. Vargas grabbed a second a minute before half-time to stun

the crowd into silence as the teams headed in for the break. Chile then cut loose early in the second half with slick inter-play ripping apart a feeble Mexican defense at will. Arsenal star Alexis Sanchez made it 3-0 in the 49th minute before two more goals from Vargas in the 52nd and 57th minutes piled on the agony for Mexico. Several Mexican players visibly wilted in the face of the onslaught, and for periods the game resembled a training exercise for Chile as they swept forward relentlessly.

Vargas's fourth made it 6-0 on the night before Puch then toe-poked home to complete the scoring. Brazilian referee Heber Lopes spared Mexico the possibility of greater humiliation, whistling for full-time almost on the stroke of 90 minutes, with no time added on. — AFP

MESSI TIES WITH RECORD AS ARGENTINA BEAT VENEZUELA

FOXBOROUGH: Lionel Messi scored a record-equating 54th international goal as Argentina outclassed Venezuela 4-1 to book their place in the semi-finals of the Copa America Centenario here Saturday. The Barcelona superstar scored his fourth goal of the tournament in the 60th minute at the Gillette Stadium to equal Gabriel Batistuta's long-time Argentina international goalscoring record.

Messi also created a goal for Gonzalo Higuain, who scored twice, and second half substitute Erik Lamela as Argentina set up a semi-final against the United States in Houston tomorrow. Afterwards Messi played down his goalscoring milestone. "I'm happy for what it means and it's nice to be next to 'Batigol'"

(Batistuta), but for me tonight the most important thing is the result," Messi said. Messi is determined to lead Argentina to their first trophy in 23 years after a series of agonizing near-misses which include defeats in the finals of last year's Copa America and the 2014 World Cup final. "I think people sometimes overlook that we got to two finals, and only focus on the fact that we lost," Messi said. "For us to be back in another semi-final of a big tournament like this one is a great achievement for these players."

Inspirational display

Few would bet against Messi achieving his goal after an inspirational display that left Venezuela chasing shadows in the early part of Saturday's quarter-final. Messi's genius created the opening goal after eight minutes, with the playmaker lofting a sublime curling pass to pick out Higuain's run into the area.

Napoli forward Higuain still had plenty to do but

skillfully directed a first time strike past Venezuela goalkeeper Dani Hernandez for a wonderful goal. Argentina remained firmly in control but were jolted in the 27th minute when Nicolas Gaitan picked up a needless yellow card for a kick on Alexander Gonzalez that will see him suspended for the semi-final.

Argentina's dominance clearly had Venezuela rattled, and the Vinotinto's defensive unease led to the next goal. A slack backpass from Arquimedes Figuera went straight to Higuain in space, and the striker coolly rounded Hernandez to stroke home his second of the night to make it 2-0 after 29 minutes. But just when it looked as if the floodgates would open, Venezuela rallied impressively and had Argentina rocking with a series of chances.

Rondon threat

West Bromwich Albion striker Salomon Rondon forced a save from Sergio Romero and hit the woodwork in quick succession. Romero was left scrambling to save once again just before half-time, when fullback Rolf Feltscher's long-range shot deflected off Gabriel Mercado and looped up and over the Argentina keeper.

Venezuela looked to have a justifiable claim for a penalty when Higuain brought down Josef Martinez in the box but Mexican referee Roberto Garcia was unmoved. Seconds later though Garcia was pointing to the spot after Romero clumsily bundled over Martinez for a clear penalty. But Venezuela's pressure went unrewarded when Luis Manuel Seijas tried a risky "Panenka" down the middle which Romero read and gathered with ease.

Venezuela were unable to renew their period of pres-



FOXBOROUGH: Argentina's Lionel Messi, top, celebrates a goal by Gonzalo Higuain (9) during the first half of a Copa America Centenario quarterfinal soccer match against Venezuela. — AP

sure in the second half, and Messi effectively put the contest to bed with his record-equating goal in the 60th minute, which came after Argentina pressed high to force a turnover. Gaitan won the tackle and passed to Messi, who quickly played a one-two with the Benfica

winger before poking his finish between Hernandez's legs. Rondon pulled a goal back with a header in the 70th minute, but Messi's response was instant, threading a pass to Lamela whose shot crept in at Hernandez's near post. — AFP