

GUINEA AIM TO EXTEND LEICESTER-LIKE STREAK

LIBREVILLE: Shock qualifiers Guinea-Bissau face hosts Gabon today in the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations opener, hoping to continue a Leicester City-like run in the competition. Traditional underachievers Leicester were the sensational winners of the 2015-2016 English Premier League, giving football minnows across the world belief that nothing is impossible.

The West Africans were dismissed as 'cannon fodder' two years ago in an elimination group including former champions Zambia and Congo Brazzaville. But they finished first with a game to spare after back-to-back victories over Kenya and a thrilling triumph against Zambia in a packed Bissau stadium. Now, a rusty squad known as the 'wild dogs' whose last competitive match was four months ago, must raise their game to an even higher level in their Cup of Nations tournament debut.

"We eliminated former champions Congo

and Zambia and can perform even better. The squad will work ceaselessly to achieve good results," promised coach Baciro Cande. "My squad comprises 23 proud professional footballers who are thinking only of bringing joy to the people of Guinea-Bissau. "The best way to achieve that is by winning matches and qualifying for the quarter-finals in our Africa Cup debut.

Gabon superstar

While virtually all the Guinea-Bissau squad are unknown beyond the borders of the former Portuguese colony, Gabon boast a superstar in striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. The 27-year-old Borussia Dortmund goal machine, born in France to a Gabonese father and Spanish mother, has a particular desire to succeed in front of his home crowd. When Gabon co-hosted the 2012 Cup of Nations with Equatorial Guinea, they were eliminated by Mali in the

quarter-finals on penalties. Only one spot-kick in the shootout was missed and the culprit was Aubameyang, whose father Pierre Aubame once captained the national team known as the Panthers. The striker wept as he left the Libreville pitch, saying "my people expected more from me. I am so disappointed to have let them down." Gabon played competitively only twice last year-failing to score in World Cup draws with Morocco and Mali-leaving Spanish coach Jose-Antonio Camacho a tad apprehensive. The former Real Madrid and Spain handler took charge only last month after underperforming Portuguese Jorge Costa was axed. Depleted Cameroon face unpredictable Burkina Faso in the second match of an opening-day Group A double-header at the 40,000-seat Stade de l'Amitié in the Gabon capital.

Eight of the Cameroon preliminary squad withdrew, including Liverpool defender Joel

Matip and Schalke striker Eric-Maxim Choupo-Moting, saying their club careers took priority. "We are victims of blackmail," lamented official Simon Lyonga, accusing European club managers of encouraging players to snub the 23-day African football festival.

When the dust settled, Belgium-born coach Hugo Broos named regular Lorient scorer Benjamin Moukandjo as the new skipper of the Indomitable Lions. Predicting how the Burkinabe will perform under Portuguese coach Paulo Duarte is a hazardous task. No-hopers in 2013, they reached the final before losing narrowly to Nigeria. A couple of years later, they performed woefully, bowing out after the first round without a win. What the Stallions do possess is abundant Cup of Nations experience with the likes of defender Bakary Kone, midfielder and captain Charles Kabore and attacker Jonathan Pitroipa. —AFP

NO ROOM FOR ERROR FOR PSG

PARIS: With one eye twitching in the direction of Barcelona in the Champions League, Paris Saint-Germain head into their first taste of 2017 French league action with ground to make up. Today's game at a Rennes side with realistic designs on Europe will, PSG hope, reignite their form after an opening half of the campaign which saw four defeats and left them five points adrift of Ligue 1 table-toppers Nice.

With Monaco also three points above them, PSG have work to do if they are to rekindle ambitions of a fifth straight championship success and third straight domestic treble.

And with Nice unlikely to slip up Sunday at home to lowly Metz, midfielder Adrien Rabiot knows the Paris side cannot afford to get distracted by the prospect of the visit of Barcelona on Valentine's Day. "We told ourselves we have a number of targets and we want to win everything. We've started the second part of the season well," Rabiot told France television after a midweek league cup win over Metz.

More domestic dominance on all fronts looks to be a minimum target for Spanish coach Unai Emery, who managed a hat-trick of Europa League triumphs with Sevilla before heading to Paris to replace Laurent Blanc. New attacking impetus has arrived in the shape of German international star and 2014 world champion Julian Draxler, recruited for 40 million euros (\$42 million) from Wolfsburg.

While PSG look to fine-tune their handsomely monied but spluttering motor, Nice and Monaco are showing that the game in the French south consists of more than Marseille. With Marseille in sixth place and looking unlikely to capture a Champions League slot, Riviera neighbors Nice and Monaco—who play Marseille this weekend—are going great guns.

Nice, buoyed by the recent arrival of Chinese, US and Middle East investment, won all four of their league crowns in the 1950s but have failed to each such heights since. They finished fourth last term. They ended their December league program with a draw against Bordeaux, rescued despite sendings-off for former Liverpool misfit Mario Balotelli and Younes Belhanda. Balotelli won't feature against Metz because of suspension.

Monaco's task appears more tricky away at Marseille. Marseille media report that the club is determined to bring in fresh blood in the transfer window and is keeping an eye on the situation regarding West Ham's French striker Dimitri Payet, who has told the Londoners he'd like a move and harbors hopes of a return to the Stade Velodrome. Another name reputedly in the frame is veteran Ivorian striker and former OM and Chelsea favorite Didier Drogba. — AFP



LIBREVILLE: President of Gabon, Ali Bongo Ondimba jokes with American-born Nigerian recording artist, Davido (L) during a visit at the Stade de l'Amitié Sino Stadium yesterday. — AFP

IVORIANS IMPRESS AS 'AUBA', MAHREZ LEAD STARS PARADE

LIBREVILLE: New-look Ivory Coast are preparing to defend the Africa Cup of Nations, which kicks off in Gabon today, buoyed by encouraging results and impressive form from new recruit Wilfried Zaha. The Crystal Palace flier hopes to make an impact in a competition that boasts Europe-based stars like Riyad Mahrez of Algeria, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang of Gabon and Sadio Mane of Senegal.

Zaha is a timely addition as many former stars like the Toure brothers Kolo and Yaya have retired and star winger Gervinho is injured. Abidjan-born Zaha has been lured to the African champions by the possibilities of Cup of Nations and World Cup glory after two friendly appearances for adopted country England. He set up the crucial goal in a 2-1 warm-up win over Sweden last Sunday and scored in a 3-0 thumping of fellow Cup of Nations qualifiers Uganda three days later.

Ahead of the training camp in the United Arab Emirates, France-born coach

Michel Dussuyer admitted he was concerned about a scarcity of goals. Ivory Coast are in a challenging Group C and kick off their campaign on Monday against Emmanuel Adebayor-captained Togo, followed by showdowns with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Morocco.

"The objective is, of course, to defend the title that was proudly acquired in 2015," said Dussuyer, one of 12 European or South American coaches in the 16-team tournament. "It will not be easy. There are fine teams who aspire to win the trophy, but we have the weapons to go far."

Morocco are coached by Frenchman Herve Renard, who guided the Ivorians two years ago to their second Cup of Nations title. "I have made reaching the quarter-finals an objective that we absolutely must attain. If we get there, then we will see what we can do," said the perennially bronzed and white-shirted Renard. He also coached Zambia to glory the last time the Africa Cup was staged in

Gabon-jointly with Equatorial Guinea in 2012. Lightning-quick striker Aubameyang carries the hopes of Gabon, who are expected to make the quarter-finals from a Group A that includes four-time champions but severely depleted Cameroon, Burkina Faso and shock qualifiers Guinea-Bissau. As the Borussia Dortmund striker prepares to carry the hopes of the small central African nation on his shoulders, fleet-footed Mahrez will aim to top a magnificent 12 months by taking Algeria to the February 5 final and their continental title since 1990.

Major contenders

Mahrez heads for Gabon fresh from winning the African Player of the Year prize for 2016, pipping last year's winner Aubameyang. "The next thing after this award is the Africa Cup of Nations. My team will try to do good things there," the France-born star of Leicester City's sensational Premier League title triumph said after securing the CAF prize. —AFP