

JAPAN COACH FACES REVIEW AFTER IRAQ DRAW

TOKYO: Japan coach Vahid Halilhodzic was facing a performance review yesterday after a 1-1 draw with Iraq set back his team's World Cup qualifying campaign. Japan's football chief was left fuming by the result in neutral Tehran, saying hot conditions were no excuse for the disappointing result.

"(The heat) is not an excuse. We could have potentially lost the match," Japan FA chief Kozo

Tashima told reporters, according to Kyodo News agency. "We need to feel fortunate that we took a point from here." The Blue Samurai took an early lead but they lacked intensity in the second half, when the Iraqis equalised in the 73rd minute.

Japan missed the chance to take a three-point cushion at the top of Group B, ahead of their final games against Saudi Arabia and Australia who are both just one point back.

Despite the setback, Japan will advance to next year's World Cup in Russia if they beat Australia at home on August 31.

When asked if Bosnia's Halilhodzic would keep his job, JFA technical director Akira Nishino said "of course", according to the Nikkan Sports daily. But he added: "A review is needed. There was enough time. How was our preparation until today? We must have a full grasp on that."

Halilhodzic said he was "disappointed" by his side's showing, adding that injuries hampered the team and that his team were "exhausted".

"I am absolutely not satisfied," he told reporters after the Tuesday match in Tehran. "I told the team at half-time that we can kill off the game if we score a second but then we let one in. We were exhausted, and could not carry out the plan we had in place." — AFP



BIRMINGHAM: India cricket captain Virat Kohli attends a press conference at Edgbaston cricket ground in Birmingham yesterday, ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy semi-final cricket match between India and Bangladesh. — AFP photos

CRICKET

KOHLI URGES INDIA ON IN BANGLADESH SEMI

BIRMINGHAM: India captain Virat Kohli has promised there will be no let-up from the title-holders when they face Bangladesh in the semi-finals of the Champions Trophy at Edgbaston today.

After a surprise group defeat by Sri Lanka in a tournament featuring the world's top eight one-day international sides, India responded to their 'win or go home' clash against South Africa with a commanding eight-wicket victory over the top-ranked Proteas at the Oval last weekend.

India's bowlers put the brakes on South Africa's innings while a trio of run-outs said much about the Proteas' frailty and the improved fielding standards of Kohli's men.

Needing a mere 192 for victory, Kohli was there at the finish with 76 not out as India won with a whopping 12 overs to spare.

It was an innings that helped take the India skipper back to number one in the ICC ODI batting rankings. Now India return to Edgbaston where they launched their title-defence with a

124-run thrashing of arch-rivals Pakistan.

"We played in Birmingham before. We like that pitch. It suits our game," said Kohli after the win over South Africa. "There's no looking back. There's always room for improvement. We can't rest on your laurels.

With Pakistan facing tournament hosts England in Wednesday's first semi-final in Cardiff, three of the four teams left in the tournament are all from the sub-continent. Kohli acknowledged the amount of one-day cricket played in the region was a factor, but he has also been impressed with the way so many of the Asian nations have adapted to English conditions.

"Maybe because of how much limited-overs cricket we play, I think the players are getting more experienced in difficult situations," he said. "Maybe some of the teams have really surprised the opposition with the way they have batted and bowled in certain situations."

There was certainly plenty of good work with the ball carried out by Bangladesh's bowlers as they held New Zealand to a modest 265 for eight in Cardiff last time out.

The Tigers were, however, still looking at an embarrassing defeat when they slumped to 33 for four in reply. But Shakib Al Hasan (114) and Mahmudullah (102 not out) responded to the pressure of a dire position in a must-win game with a brilliant new Bangladesh record partnership of 224 that turned the match upside down and eventually saw New Zealand eliminated.

Bangladesh's place in the last four was then confirmed when England beat Australia at Edgbaston. India have 26 of their 32 ODIs against Bangladesh, suffering just five defeats with one no result.

But Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Mortaza believes wins such as the one over New Zealand will bolster the side's already growing self-belief.

"In the last three years we keep improving a lot," he said. "This sort of performance really helps us to move forward, especially with the 2019 World Cup (in England) coming up." — AFP



BIRMINGHAM: Bangladesh cricketer Mashrafe Mortaza attends a training session at Edgbaston cricket ground in Birmingham yesterday, ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy semi-final cricket match between India and Bangladesh.

MAMIC OUTBURST DELAYS TESTIMONY FROM LOVREN

OSIJEK: Liverpool defender Dejan Lovren's turn in the witness box at a multi-million euro corruption trial was adjourned yesterday after a furious outburst from defendant Zdravko Mamic, the former chairman of Dinamo Zagreb.

Lovren, 27, arrived at the tribunal in Croatia's eastern city of Osijek to be questioned over his 2010 transfer from Dinamo to French side Lyon.

Mamic, considered the most powerful man in Croatian football, is being tried along with three others: his brother and former Dinamo coach Zoran Mamic, former club director Damir Vrbancic, and a tax inspector.

They were charged last year with abuse of power and graft that cost the former Croatian champions more than 15 million euros (\$17.6

million), and the state 1.5 million euros. Most of the money—more than 12 million euros—was illegally acquired by the Mamic brothers notably through fictitious deals related to player transfers, according to the indictment.

Yesterday, during the testimony of Lovren's father, Mamic stood up and complained about the prosecutor's questions to the witness. After a warning from the judge, Mamic's two attorneys tried to calm him down but only made him more angry.

"What are you talking about! I can behave this way because my skin is at stake," the furious 57-year-old shouted at his lawyers.

"Get lost! You will not defend me... I will defend myself!"

Mamic told the judge he was sacking his lawyers, who in turn said they were terminating their services to the defendant. After a pause, the judge set the next hearing for early July. Lovren is to appear as a witness in September.

On Tuesday, Real Madrid midfielder Luka Modric, 31, appeared in the witness box to give evidence over financial details of his 2008 transfer from Dinamo to Tottenham Hotspur.

Neither of the two players is a suspect. "I'm a guy with balls. Anyone who wants to can check," Mamic told reporters after the hearing.

Mamic's trial is a major one for Croatian football, which is known for the success of its national team but also hooliganism and poor infrastructure. — AFP

TIOTE'S AGENT CALLS FOR END TO SPECULATION OVER DEATH

LONDON: The agent of the late Ivory Coast midfielder Cheick Tiote yesterday called for the media to cease making unsubstantiated claims about the reasons for his death.

The 52-time capped star—a member of the Ivory Coast squad that ended a 23-year drought in winning the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations—died after fainting during training with second division side Beijing Enterprises on June 5. He was 30 years of age. His death shocked the football world, reverberating in England, where he played for seven years at Newcastle United before joining the Beijing team in February.

However, with his body being flown home to the Ivory Coast after an emotional farewell held at a funeral home in China on Tuesday—Emanuele Palladino issued a statement to Press Association Sport calling on the speculation over why he died to end out of sympathy for his family's feelings.

"There is increasing speculation regarding the circumstances and reasons behind Cheick Tiote's death with many inaccuracies being printed in the press on this subject," Palladino said. "This has been upsetting for Cheick's family and all parties involved at what is already a difficult time.

"We appreciate Cheick was a much-loved personality. His club Beijing Enterprises are being co-operative at this

time and when we have official information surrounding his death we will give a statement on behalf of his family.

"Until then we cannot comment further however we thank you for all your continued support and well wishes." Tiote's body is expected to arrive back in the Ivory Coast today and more tributes are planned for the player.

The national team returned to Abidjan on Monday after an Africa Cup of Nations qualifying defeat by Guinea and presented their condolences to the player's family.

Tiote was one of 10 children, who like many of his Ivory Coast team-mates, grew up in abject poverty and didn't possess a pair of boots until he was 15, but whose lucrative move to China gave him the opportunity to help his family financially.

"It was his dream to play in China and I was so delighted for him when it happened," said former England manager Steve McClaren, who coached him twice, once at Dutch side Twente where they won the 2010 league title and then at Newcastle (2015/16).

"He earned money to look after his family. He loved playing football to look after his family. All the relatives, uncles, aunts, grandparents, they all relied on him to look after them." — AFP

RUGBY

LIONS COACH GATLAND RUES MISTAKES AS LOSSES MOUNT

DUNEDIN: Frustrated British and Irish Lions coach Warren Gatland says his players must stop caving under pressure at key moments after 'shooting themselves in the foot' in their latest defeat.

The tourists threw away a nine-point lead to lose 23-22 to the Otago Highlanders on Tuesday, stalling momentum gained from a gutsy win over the Canterbury Crusaders.

Gatland admitted the performance was "a step backwards", blaming poor discipline that cost 12 penalties and a lack of composure in the dying minutes. "To be 22-13 up and feeling reasonably comfortable means it is disappointing to give it away," he said. "We didn't nail a few big moments that were important. We shot ourselves in the foot with some turnovers and penalties in the last 10 minutes. The big learning is that New Zealand sides play for 80 minutes. The penalties really hurt us."

It was the Lions' second loss on tour and their next fixture is the Maori All Blacks on Saturday, with the first Test against New Zealand looming a week on Saturday.

Gatland is expected to name a near-Test strength team as he seeks a morale-boosting win in what is sure to be a physically challenging Maori match.

MISSED CHANCES

While the Lions' attack finally fired against the Highlanders—with tries to Jonathan Joseph, Tommy Seymour and captain Sam Warburton—they panicked in the face of a late comeback.

Their defence disintegrated to give Liam Coltman a pushover try then a needless

scrum infringement gifted Marty Banks a penalty to put the Highlanders ahead.

Owen Farrell and Elliot Daly also missed crucial kicks as the Lions fell short. "We needed some strong game management to close the game down," Gatland said. On his second appearance on tour, Warburton scored a try and looked in decent shape. But after he and impressive scrum-half Rhys Webb left the field, the Lions were a different side.

In the two games in which they have been refereed by Australian official Angus Gardner — against the Provincial Barbarians and in Dunedin — the Lions have conceded 25 penalties.

Gatland also provided more details about the injury that forced Scottish full-back Stuart Hogg out of the tour. The Six Nations player of the tournament in each of the last two seasons suffered a fractured eye socket against the Crusaders after colliding with teammate Conor Murray.

Gatland said Hogg was warned he could lose his sight if he played on with the injury. "It was a freak accident. Stuart is absolutely gutted and we are really feeling for him," he said.

"He saw four specialists and one of them said he could be right in seven to 10 days, but the others said it was a reasonably serious injury with the possibility that he could lose his sight.

"We said it's only a game of rugby and he had to get his health right. He understood that." Hogg's departure means Leigh Halfpenny is now almost certain to start the Test series wearing the number 15 jersey. — AFP



SINGAPORE: In this Saturday, March 4, 2017 file photo South Africa's Malcolm Adrian Emile Jaer of the Southern Kings leaps over Japan's Takaaki Nakazuru of the Sunwolves, during their Super Rugby match in Singapore. The South Africa Rugby Union has called a special meeting for July 7 to decide which two of its six teams are dropped from Super Rugby. — AP