



SNIPPETS



# Ronaldo earns edgy Portugal 1-0 win as Morocco's hopes end

## Cristiano is tournament leading scorer on four

**MOSCOW:** Cristiano Ronaldo powered-home a fourth-minute header to give Portugal a 1-0 World Cup victory over Morocco that took them top of Group B yesterday and meant the unlucky North African side become the first to be eliminated from the tournament.

Ronaldo's fourth goal of Russia 2018, following his hat-trick in the 3-3 draw with Spain, took the European champions to four points. Iran have three points and Spain one ahead of their meeting later yesterday.

Morocco, who had a real go at the Luzhniki Stadium but failed to convert their chances, are pointless having also lost 1-0 to Iran and cannot progress to the second round. Portugal struggled to impose themselves and ended up defending for long spells, leaving coach Fernando Santos unimpressed. "We have to look at this, we lost control of the game," he said.

"We misplaced a lot of passes, we lost confidence... it was inexplicable. If in a match against players like they have, if you don't have the ball, they wear you down and you get into trouble."

Despite their battling display, Morocco will rue the unforgivable defending that made all their subsequent good work irrelevant. They qualified for the finals without conceding a goal in six matches yet somehow opted against marking the most dangerous attacker at the tournament in the six yard box when Joao Moutinho swung in a cross from a short corner and Ronaldo duly buried the header.

It was his 85th international goal, taking him beyond Hungarian Ferenc Puskas's European record, with only Iran's Ali Daei ahead of him on 109. Morocco, in their first finals appearance for 20 years, regrouped well and showed some real positivity in attack with Hakim Ziyech and Nordin Amrabat seeing plenty of the ball and Amrabat furious at not being awarded a penalty after wrestling with Raphael Guerreiro.



**MOSCOW:** Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo (C) challenges Morocco's defender Mehdi Benatia (B) and Morocco's midfielder Mehdi Carcela (R) during the Russia 2018 World Cup Group B football match between Portugal and Morocco at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow yesterday. — AFP

The midfielder had begun the game with head protection after being seemingly knocked unconscious against Iran five days ago in a sight that will have left medical professionals fuming about football's feeble concussion protocols.

When they managed to stop appealing and resumed play, Morocco looked dangerous and were the dominant side in the second half. Portugal goalkeeper Rui Patrício made a fantastic diving low save to touch clear Younes Belhanda's

sharp header but Medhi Benatia's blazed effort over the bar was more typical of their finishing from half-a-dozen reasonable chances.

"I'm not disappointed about the performance, I'm happy with it and very proud of my players," emotional Morocco coach Herve Renard told reporters. "As in the first game, we had a lot of chances and I won't criticise anyone." Portugal complete their first-round against Iran while Morocco face Spain, both on June 25. — Reuters

## Kosovo will be cheering for Swiss against Serbia

**PRISTINA:** Kosovo's team is taking no part in the World Cup but emotions are running high ahead of Serbia's match between Switzerland, whose squad includes three players from Kosovo. Midfielders Valon Behrami of Italian club Udinese, Arsenal's Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri of Stoke City were all born in Kosovo and all three played in Switzerland's surprise 1-1 draw against Brazil.

Along with Bologna's Blerim Dzemali, born in neighbouring Macedonia, Albanian-speaking players made more than a third of the starting line-up against Brazil. The children of immigrants to Switzerland, they have not commented on Friday's match in Kaliningrad which could be decisive for qualification from their group.

Only Shaqiri commented, when the groups were drawn in December, saying: "I'm, I like this draw." However, relatives of the players make no secret of the symbolic importance of the match when seen from Kosovo's capital Pristina.

For Valon Behrami's uncle Qaush, his nephew will have a "special motivation for victory" on Friday, because his parents suffered while Kosovo was Serbia's province. "They both lost their jobs and father was persecuted," Qaush Behrami said. Agon Xhaka, a 22-year-old football player, said the father of his cousin Granit was in a prison during the regime of late Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic and that the "family emigrated after he was released."

### SWISS REFUGE

Like dozens of thousands of others, during the 1998-1999 war between Kosovo ethnic Albanian pro-independence guerrilla and Serbian forces, the families of Behrami, Xhaka and Shaqiri took refuge in Switzerland.

There are no official figures, but an estimated 200,000 Kosovo Albanians live in Switzerland, a striking number when compared with Kosovo's 1.8 million inhabitants. Along with the community living in Germany, they make up one of the main sources of income for Kosovo, sending around 175 million Swiss francs (152 million euros, \$176 million) back every year.

This emigration dates back to before the Kosovo war. Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj also lived in Switzerland, working as a bouncer and karate instructor before returning to Kosovo and becoming one of the pro-independence guerrilla leaders.

The last of the conflicts that accompanied the collapse of Yugoslavia claimed some 13,500 lives. More than 10,000 of the victims were Kosovo Albanians. The war ended when NATO bombing forced Milosevic to withdraw his troops. Less than a decade later Kosovo declared independence in 2008. Belgrade still refuses to recognise the declaration and is supported by its traditional ally Russia. — AFP



Xherdan Shaqiri

## Blatter attends Moscow match: 'It's my WCup'

**MOSCOW:** Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter attended a World Cup match in Moscow yesterday, saying the tournament in Russia felt like "my World Cup", but soccer's world governing body said his presence did not directly violate his ban from football activities.

Blatter, who led FIFA for 17 years, is serving a six-year ban from "all football activities" for unethical conduct after FIFA was rocked by a global corruption scandal in 2015. His appearance at the World Cup in Russia is potentially embarrassing for FIFA and its new head, Gianni Infantino, who has promised to draw a line under FIFA's corruption problems and clean up the organisation.

TASS news agency quoted Alexei Sorokin, head of the Russia-2018 organising committee, as saying he had seen Infantino and Blatter at Moscow's Luzhniki stadium watching Portugal's 1-0 win over Morocco. "Today I saw Infantino and Blatter at the stadium, it's true," TASS quoted Sorokin as saying.

In an interview with Britain's Channel 4 News, Blatter said he had been invited to the World Cup by the Russian organising committee and FIFA should respect his right to be at the tournament. "I am not in football activities. I am a personal guest here today," he said. "It should not be an embarrassment to FIFA. If FIFA would have a little bit of respect, knowing that I have an official invitation to come here." — Reuters

## Hazard warning fires hungry Lukaku up for glory

**MOSCOW:** It may have needed a half-time rocket from captain Eden Hazard to jolt Romelu Lukaku into action in Belgium's World Cup opener but coach Roberto Martinez believes the striker has the hunger to fulfil his ambition of global domination.

The Chelsea playmaker gave Lukaku a piece of his mind in Sochi on Monday after Belgium had huffed and puffed but failed to blow Panama's modest defensive fortress down before the interval. "At half-time, I told him we needed him. He'd been hiding out a bit up front," Hazard told reporters. "It's not easy playing with a man missing. But once he got in there, involved in the game, like magic, he scored two. 'I hope he understands that now,'" Hazard added after Belgium opened their Group G campaign with a 3-0 win.

That public dressing down fuelled talk of discord in the camp outside Moscow, where Martinez gave his players Wednesday off following their exertions on the humid Black Sea coast before they face Tunisia on Sunday and England next Thursday. Images of defender Jan Vertonghen screaming at a lack of cover from Yannick Carrasco before the winger was withdrawn, have also sounded alarm bells about a return of the infighting that has dogged the Red Devils at previous big tournaments.

Martinez played down rumours of disharmony and said he had faith in Lukaku delivering not just on his promise of becoming the best striker in the world but also for a team anxious to go further than Belgium's previous best of semi-finals in 1986.

"My team can share views," the Spaniard told reporters on Tuesday. "Any sort of negative word between the players... is not a type of attitude that we have. 'Of course, we want to demand from each other, and that's natural, what happens in a dressing room.'" Vertonghen, the side's most capped player, also denied talk of a rift, calling it the best Belgian team he has known: "We're a complete team," the Tottenham Hotspur defender said. "There's always going to be stress, but I think we coped well."

Lukaku could get better yet, Martinez said: "The drive is what interests me in a young player, why does he play football? And Romelu Lukaku plays football to be the best in his position. 'He can be as good as he wants to be.'" Lukaku himself, in an interview with 'The Players' Tribune magazine, spoke of the childhood poverty and smears against his Congolese heritage as motivation for his ambition.

"I wanted to be the best footballer in Belgian history," he said. "Not good. Not great. The best. 'I played with so much anger, because of a lot of things... because of the rats running around in our apartment... because of how the other parents used to look at me. 'I was on a mission.'" — Reuters