

## Sports

# Morocco crash out to Benin on penalties in Nations Cup last 16

## Mane scores and misses penalty as Senegal end Uganda's run

CAIRO: Hakim Ziyech's missed stoppage-time spot-kick proved extremely costly as 10-man Benin stunned Africa Cup of Nations title contenders Morocco in a penalty shootout Friday to reach the quarter-finals after a 1-1 draw in Cairo. Moise Adilehou forced home at a corner early in the second half to put Benin on course for a shock win but Youssef En-Nesyri equalised for Morocco before Ajax star Ziyech blew the chance to snatch victory by striking the post from the spot in the 96th minute.

Benin were forced to play most of extra time a man down after Khaled Adenon received a second yellow card for dissent, but they prevailed 4-1 in the shootout following misses by Sofiane Boufal and En-Nesyri to set up a clash with Senegal on July 10 for a spot in the semi-finals. "It's not the right time to talk about anything," said Morocco boss Herve Renard, after possibly his final game in charge. "The only thing I would like to say is thank you very much to all the fans who came to Egypt to support us."

"I'm a bit ashamed in front of them, and especially about all the people who were supporting us since more than three years. "You know in life of course, some people are against you, but this is life. You just have to look forward and only remember the positive things." Morocco suffered a troubled build-up to the tie at Al Salam Stadium with captain and key defender Medhi Benatia lost to injury while Benin were without forward Steve Mounie due to suspension.

The Atlas Lions had been clinical, determined and efficient so far in Egypt, mirroring the beliefs of Renard, the only coach to win the Cup of Nations with two countries. Benin, winless in 12 previous matches in the competition, only scraped through to the knockout rounds on the back of three draws after holding both Ghana and reigning champions Cameroon. En-Nesyri and Ziyech both produced saves in a dreary first half from Saturnin Allagbe,

who kept his place in the Benin goal after replacing Fabien Farnolle for the final group game.

### Adilehou strikes first

Younes Belhanda skewed wide for Morocco shortly after the restart but it was Benin who grabbed a surprise lead when Adilehou broke clear of his marker to turn in a corner on 54 minutes, the Squirrels' first goal since their opening game in Egypt. Substitute Boufal nearly levelled with his first touch after coming off the bench on the hour, meeting Nordin Amrabat's cross with a downward header that skipped off the grass and flashed just over the top. A mistake from Jordan Adeoti presented Morocco with the equaliser on 75 minutes, as he was caught in possession on the edge of his area by Mbark Boussoufa who squared for En-Nesyri to stroke beyond Allagbe.

Ziyech stung the palms of Allagbe with a free-kick while Boussoufa, who scored a last-gasp winner in the 1-0 victory over South Africa, also saw his set-piece superbly clawed away by the Benin keeper. After a quiet start to the tournament Ziyech looked destined to finally deliver when Benin captain Stephane Sessegnon upended Achraf Hakimi deep into stoppage time, but the winger smacked his spot-kick against the base of the post.

Adenon's bizarre dismissal, ostensibly for brushing the referee away as he attempted to tend to a cramping teammate, gave Morocco the numerical advantage but Ziyech again squandered an opportunity to send his side through as he blazed over a cutback from Boussoufa. Morocco were left to count the cost of those misses as Boufal blazed over Morocco's second attempt in the shootout before Allagbe tipped En-Nesyri's effort onto the bar, leaving Mama Seibou to fire Benin into the last eight.

### Senegal end Uganda's run

Meanwhile, Senegal forward Sadio Mane continued his



CAIRO: Morocco's forward Youssef En-Nesyri misses a penalty during the penalty shoot-out of the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) Round of 16 football match between Morocco and Benin at the Al-Salam Stadium on July 5, 2019. — AFP

hit-and-miss tournament when he scored his third goal of the Africa Cup of Nations but also missed a penalty for the second game running as his side beat Uganda 1-0 to reach the quarter-finals on Friday. Mane broke the deadlock in the 15th minute of a physical game after Senegal pounced on a mistake by Uganda, who were in the knockout stages for the first time in 41 years.

However, he squandered the chance to give Senegal some breathing space when his spot kick was saved by goalkeeper Denis Onyango in the 61st minute of a game which featured 45 fouls. Outsiders Uganda, whose players were involved in a pay dispute with their federation in the run-up to the game, gave Senegal a stern test at a near-deserted Cairo International stadium. —Agencies

## Infantino eyes further WCup expansion after 'best ever' tournament

LYON: FIFA president Gianni Infantino said on Friday he is determined to push ahead with plans to expand the women's World Cup to 32 teams in time for the next tournament after hailing France 2019 as "the best ever". Speaking at a press conference in Lyon, where the World Cup concludes today as holders the United States and the Netherlands contest the final, Infantino claimed the tournament had been "phenomenal" as he promised huge increases in investment in the women's game and to the prize fund for future competitions.

"There was a before and there will be an after the World Cup but it is up to us to seize the opportunity and do something about it," added Infantino, who last month was re-elected for a second four-year term in charge of world football's governing body. Rolling out a series of proposals for the development of the women's game, Infantino said he would try to expand the competition from 24 teams to 32 in time for the next tournament in four years.

"I think we should increase the number of participants," said Infantino, who has succeeded in expanding the men's tournament from 32 teams to 48 in time for the 2026 finals. "The tricky thing is that we have a World Cup coming in 2023 for which we started just a couple of months ago a bidding process based on 24 teams, so there we will need to act more quickly if we want to have more teams already in 2023."

This is only the second women's World Cup since it was expanded from 16 teams to 24 in Canada four years ago. The competition started out with 12 teams in 1991. Infantino suggested FIFA may need to "reopen the bidding



ZURICH: Argentinian President Mauricio Macri (center), FIFA President Gianni Infantino (right) and the president of the South American football's governing body Conmebol, Paraguayan Alejandro Dominguez pose with a ball in Zurich. — AFP

process and allow everyone to have a chance to organise or maybe co-host" but claimed that "nothing is impossible". A decision on who hosts the 2023 finals will be made next year, with Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Japan, South Africa, and New Zealand among the contenders, while the possibility of South Korea co-hosting with North Korea has also been raised.

Earlier in the tournament, USA star Alex Morgan stated her wish to see the competition expanded to give developing countries more reason to invest in the women's game. "It's great to see quality games and quality teams, and my hope is eventually we cap it at 32 teams moving forward,"

she said after her team's 13-0 demolition of Thailand. Infantino also promised to double the prize fund for the next tournament having initially raised overall contributions from \$15 million to \$50 million in time for this year's competition.

When that increase was announced by FIFA late last year, it was criticised by players union FIFPro, who said it actually marked a "regressive trend" compared to the men's tournament. The prize money for the 2018 men's World Cup in Russia was \$400 million, a \$48 million increase from 2014. "I am very confident we can achieve the necessary figures," Infantino said on Friday. — AFP

## 'The star is the team': Madagascar punching above weight at AFCON

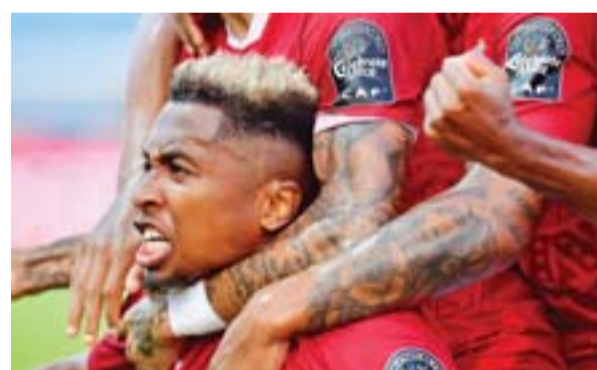
ALEXANDRIA: There is a squad comprised largely of players from the lower tiers of French football, but Madagascar have emerged as the surprise team at this year's Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt. Ranked as lowly as 190th little over five years ago, the arrival of French coach Nicolas Dupuis has transformed the perennial also-rans into a cohesive unit that is making waves in a first appearance at the continental showpiece.

The Indian Ocean islanders held Guinea to a 2-2 draw in their debut match and have gone from strength to strength in Mediterranean city Alexandria, with a 1-0 victory over Burundi followed by "the most beautiful win in Madagascar's history", a famous 2-0 defeat of three-time African champions Nigeria. Their reward for finishing top of the group is a last-16 encounter today with the Democratic Republic of Congo, a team that thrashed Madagascar 6-1 when the sides last met in 2016.

"All teams are better on paper than us," Dupuis told AFP, pointing out that none of the players involved that day are part of the current squad. "Everything has changed, the team is no longer the same. The players have changed and the set-up has changed. It's much more professional, the staff as well, with proper physical trainers, physiotherapists and doctors. Everything is done better and in a professional manner. It's normal that we've had a few more results."

While Dupuis, who juggles the job with his role at a French fourth-division club, has scoured the lower reaches of the game in his homeland for prospective players, Madagascar remain decidedly short on star power. "We don't have any stars in our team. The star is the team. We have a real team of friends but also with talented players, who are very good but perhaps not stars. Players who put with one another, if we start playing well and with tactical discipline, can make a very good team."

Charles Andriamahitsinoro was the standout performer in the group phase with two goals and an assist, but the



ALEXANDRIA: Madagascar's midfielder Lalaina Nomenjanahary celebrates after scoring a goal during the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) Group B football match between Madagascar and Nigeria. — AFP

Saudi-based attacker was quick to deflect praise back towards the group. "We did what we needed, and at a point a player stands out individually when the team needs him. That's our strength," he said.

However, the longer-term concern for Dupuis and football in Madagascar is the lack of succession planning for a team heavily reliant on aging players, such as 35-year-old captain Faneva Andriatsima and Lalaina Nomenjanahary, 33. "I've sounded the alarm in Madagascar. There is nothing being done from a technical standpoint at the national level, there's no work in terms of youth and it's serious," said Dupuis.

"I'm raising the alarm because the national team is the tree that hides the forest. "If we don't question everything, if we don't get back to work, in two years there will be no more team and in four even less so. It would be a shame because there's a real breeding ground and it's quite an old team. My role is to sound the alarm and tell officials there are lots of things in need of change in Madagascar."

For Dupuis and his players the significance of their success in Egypt has yet to properly sink in, but they will get a taste of the fervour back home with President Andry Rajoelina chartering a 480-seater plane to take fans to today's match. "We're not too aware of what we're doing, except when we get sent photos from Madagascar where it's madness right now," says Dupuis. — AFP

## Staying on feet pays off for persistent Gabriel Jesus

TERESOPOLIS: At just 22 years of age, a back-to-back Premier League title winner with Manchester City and having scored 17 goals in 34 matches for five-time world champions Brazil, it might seem absurd to say it, but Gabriel Jesus was under pressure coming into the Copa America. The former Palmeiras forward - who won the Brazilian title there too before moving to City - seems to have the world at his feet and enviable statistics for a player of his age.

Yet when he arrived at the Copa America on home soil, Jesus was the subject of severe criticism. The reason being: his lack of goals for Brazil. That's a strange accusation to put at a guy scoring an average of one in every two matches and who, with six international goals in 2019, is having his most prolific calendar year in the Selecao's yellow shirt. But the problem was that until he netted in the 2-0 Copa semi-final victory over arch rivals Argentina, Jesus's last nine goals had come in friendlies. Crucially, he didn't score at the World Cup last year and also missed an injury-time penalty in the 5-0 win over Peru earlier in the Copa. Scoring against Argentina lifted a huge weight off his shoulders.

"I'm delighted about the goal because it's something I'd been searching for since the first match at the Copa," said Jesus. "In life, sometimes things don't go as you'd like. You have to be persistent, things aren't easy." His last goal in a competitive match dated back to October 2017 and a World Cup qualifier against Chile.

Not only did he take his chance against Argentina, popping up in the right place at the right time to tap home a cross from Roberto Firmino after great work from captain Dani Alves, but he also laid the second on a plate for his strike partner. Jesus won a 50-50 challenge with Argentina midfielder German Pezzella, shrugged off a full-blooded attempted foul from his City team-mate Nicolas Otamendi as he entered the area, cut inside a sliding Juan Foyth and slipped the ball to Firmino to score. — AFP

## Atletico accuses Barcelona, Griezmann of 'disrespect'

BARCELONA: Atletico Madrid have accused Barcelona and Antoine Griezmann of a "lack of respect" after the Catalan giants' president Josep Maria Bartomeu revealed on Friday that the two clubs had held talks about the signing of the France international. In a statement, the La Liga club confirmed Bartomeu's earlier announcement that there had been a meeting, at Barca's behest, on Thursday to discuss a deal to sign World Cup winner Griezmann, who has a release clause of 120 million euros (\$134.6 million) in his contract. Atletico also said they refused a proposal from Barca that they sign the 28-year-old but delay the payment of the buy-out clause.

"Obviously our response was negative, understanding that both Barcelona and the player have disrespected Atletico Madrid and all its fans," the club said. The statement also claims that Griezmann had told the club that he had struck a deal with Barcelona in March, just days before the second leg of their Champions League last-16 tie with Juventus, which saw them dumped out by a Cristiano Ronaldo hat-trick after winning the first leg 2-0 in Madrid.

It added: "Atletico Madrid wants to express its strongest condemnation of the behaviour of both parties, in particular Barcelona, for having induced the player to break his contractual relationship with us during the moment in which the club was not only playing the Champions League tie with Juventus, but also challenging Barcelona for the La Liga title." Griezmann - who announced in May that he would be leaving Atletico but could not reveal his destination until his release clause dropped from 200 million euros on July 1 - signed for the capital club from Real Sociedad in 2014 and has since scored 133 goals in 257 appearances for Diego Simeone's men.

He has also netted 29 times in 70 international games for France, winning the 2018 World Cup and claiming the Golden Boot at Euro 2016 as Les Bleus lost in the final on home soil to Portugal. Barcelona won their second straight La Liga title last season but are looking to reinforce their squad after failing again in their bid for a first Champions League triumph since 2015 - suffering a humiliating loss to Liverpool in the semi-finals having won the first leg 3-0.

### 'Neymar wants to leave PSG'

Barca have also been linked with a possible move to bring Neymar back to the Camp Nou. But Bartomeu admitted there was little prospect of the Brazilian rejoining the club he left in a world-record 222-million-euro transfer to Paris Saint-Germain in 2017. "We know that Neymar wants to leave PSG, we know it, but we also know that PSG don't want Neymar to leave," he added. "There is no 'Neymar' file." Griezmann would not be guaranteed to walk into Barca's starting line-up, though, with Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and either Philippe Coutinho or Ousmane Dembele usually making up their front three last term.

If Barca can friction the Griezmann deal over the line despite the friction it has caused with Atletico, it could also put the futures of former Liverpool forward Coutinho and teenager Dembele in doubt. Griezmann scored 21 goals in all competitions as Atletico finished second behind Barcelona in La Liga last term, while Dembele and Coutinho managed 11 and 14 respectively. Bartomeu was speaking ahead of the presentation of rising Dutch star Frenkie de Jong, who has joined the club from Ajax for 75 million euros. — AFP