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However, Jennifer Hermoso pounced to equalise moments later after Becky Sauerbrunn had been caught in possession, and Spain held their own after that against the World Cup favourites. They were undone, though, by another penalty awarded for what looked a very slight touch on Rose Lavelle from Virginia Torrecilla.

The penalty was confirmed after a VAR check and Rapinoe smashed the ball into the same corner with 15 minutes left to give the USA the tightest of wins and line up the French. "I hope it's wild and crazy and the fans are crazy and that there's tonnes of media around it and it's just a big spectacle," Rapinoe said of Friday's match. "I think it's going to be incredible for the women's game. You have two heavy hitters meeting in the knockout rounds and this is everything you want."

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"I was so happy, just pure joy, and my teammates felt the same way," said Lindahl, when asked to describe her emotions after saving the spot-kick.

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Asked what music he would listen to before facing Germany, Gerhardsson went for some industrial metal. "It will be Rammstein. They released a new album and it will be heavy going on Saturday so that will work just fine." Today the last two quarter-final places will be decided as Italy take on China in Montpellier before European champions the Netherlands meet 2011 World Cup winners Japan in Rennes. The temperature



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Neymar accepts pay-cut in 'verbal agreement' with Barca: Reports

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But Neymar is reportedly eager to return to Spain and Barcelona are prepared to take him back, with Spanish sports newspaper Diario Sport claiming a five-year contract has been agreed.

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The 27-year-old had spent four years at Camp Nou, winning the Champions League in 2015 and two La Liga titles. He had formed a brilliant attacking trio alongside Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez. Any return for Neymar would likely require Barca to raise funds through sales. Antoine Griezmann is expected to join from Atletico Madrid for 120 million euros while Frenkie de Jong has already signed for 75 million euros from Ajax. — AFP

Salah seeks first goal at Cup of Nations in Egypt

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"Mohamed Salah was among those who missed chances, but I was satisfied with our performance," admitted Mexican coach Javier Aguirre. Victory over the Congolese, who performed poorly when losing 2-0 to Uganda, could clinch a last-16 place for the Egyptians with one match to spare.

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Uganda v Zimbabwe

Having won a Cup of Nations match for the first time in 41 years, Uganda coach Sebastian Desabre has warned his Cranes against overconfidence when they confront Zimbabwe. "It was wonderful to win after such a long time, but we must keep our feet on the ground and remain humble and focused," warned the Frenchman. "I was very impressed by Zimbabwe against Egypt and nothing less than a top-class performance from us will deliver three more points." Should Uganda and Egypt triumph, both will be guaranteed last-16 places, leaving Zimbabwe and DR Congo to try and fill one of four spots reserved for the best third-place finishers. "Our brave performance against Egypt is history and only a victory over Uganda will bring us back into contention for automatic qualification," said Zimbabwe coach Sunday Chidzambwa.

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Neither team impressed in their Group B openers with Nigeria one-goal winners over debutants Burundi and the defensive weaknesses of Guinea exposed when held by Madagascar, another newcomer. Nigeria coach Gernot Rohr blamed illness for a lacklustre showing and it took an exquisite backheel pass from Ola Aina to set up substitute Odion Ighalo for a late 1-0 win. "Some players started training only a few days before the match after becoming ill due to the change in climate from wet Nigeria to hot Egypt," said Rohr. "We are thrilled to be here after failing to qualify for the last two Cup of Nations and I expect a much better performance against a very good Guinea side." — AFP

Qatar future bright after tough Copa America debut

PORTO ALEGRE: Qatar may have fallen at the first hurdle in their South American adventure but the 2022 World Cup hosts showed enough in Brazil to suggest the future is bright for the Maroons.

They arrived at the Copa America as an unknown quantity as far as the locals were concerned but despite losing two of their three matches, Qatar proved competitive enough to ensure they won't be a surprise package next year when making their second appearance in the South American showpiece.

"There were times that we played well. We have to keep working hard," said Qatar's Spanish coach Felix Sanchez. "It's a young team looking at the next three years. We need to work hard to be strong when we get there."

Qatar have never qualified for the World Cup and will take part for the first time as hosts in 2022. Despite their modest history and tiny indigenous population, the gas-rich Gulf state has lofty ambitions and took a pair of important steps this year.

In February in the United Arab Emirates, they overcame a hostile home crowd-provoked by a political spat in the Gulf region-to win the Asian Cup for the first time, having never before gone beyond the quarter-finals.

And their participation in the Copa America—the oldest continental national team competition in the world—has exposed Qatar to a higher level of tournament than they've ever faced before.

Despite a positive start when they fought back from 2-0 down to draw 2-2 with Paraguay, it proved a chastening experience following defeats by Colombia (1-0) and Argentina (2-0). But Colombia's Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz, who has a lot of experience playing against Qatar having coached Iran for eight years, feels there is more to come.

"Qatar are here to show that there's football in Asia and if you don't respect their characteristics, their teamwork... look what happened with Paraguay," said Queiroz before his side played the Qataris.

"They go to 2-2 and Qatar could have won it." Although Colombia dominated, Qatar held on grimly for 86 minutes and created several chances on the counter-attack before eventually falling to a Duvan Zapata header.

"It was a very difficult match and it was very important to be patient," said Colombia midfielder Gustavo Cuellar after the game. "We managed to counter their threat which was the rapid transition from defense to attack." Qatar's has been a patient project, and many years in the making.

Sanchez, a product of Barcelona's renowned La Masia training center, joined Qatar's Aspire Academy—which aims to develop elite athletes—in 2006. Having coached Qatar's under-19, under-20 and under-23 teams he took over the top job from Uruguayan Jorge Fossati in July 2017. And it's been an immediate success with Qatar beating Japan 3-1 to win the first major title in their history in February. But for bouts of naivety, Qatar could realistically have made the knock-out stages in Brazil.—AFP



BELO HORIZONTE: Ecuador's Angel Mena (C) is marked by Japan's Ayase Ueda (L) as Japan's Ko Itakura look on during their Copa America football tournament group match at the Mineirao Stadium in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. — AFP

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Japan and Ecuador faced a must win match in their bid to reach the knock-out stages as one of the two best third-placed finishers. Peru had already secured their spot from Group A while Paraguay, in Group B, were left sweating on Monday's result having finished their campaign on Sunday with two points from three games.

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Salah seeks first goal at Cup of Nations in Egypt

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"Mohamed Salah was among those who missed chances, but I was satisfied with our performance," admitted Mexican coach Javier Aguirre. Victory over the Congolese, who performed poorly when losing 2-0 to Uganda, could clinch a last-16 place for the Egyptians with one match to spare.

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Uganda v Zimbabwe

Having won a Cup of Nations match for the first time in 41 years, Uganda coach Sebastian Desabre has warned his Cranes against overconfidence when they confront Zimbabwe. "It was wonderful to win after such a long time, but we must keep our feet on the ground and remain humble and focused," warned the Frenchman. "I was very impressed by Zimbabwe against Egypt and nothing less than a top-class performance from us will deliver three more points." Should Uganda and Egypt triumph, both will be guaranteed last-16 places, leaving Zimbabwe and DR Congo to try and fill one of four spots reserved for the best third-place finishers. "Our brave performance against Egypt is history and only a victory over Uganda will bring us back into contention for automatic qualification," said Zimbabwe coach Sunday Chidzambwa.

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Neither team impressed in their Group B openers with Nigeria one-goal winners over debutants Burundi and the defensive weaknesses of Guinea exposed when held by Madagascar, another newcomer. Nigeria coach Gernot Rohr blamed illness for a lacklustre showing and it took an exquisite backheel pass from Ola Aina to set up substitute Odion Ighalo for a late 1-0 win. "Some players started training only a few days before the match after becoming ill due to the change in climate from wet Nigeria to hot Egypt," said Rohr. "We are thrilled to be here after failing to qualify for the last two Cup of Nations and I expect a much better performance against a very good Guinea side." — AFP

Qatar future bright after tough Copa America debut

PORTO ALEGRE: Qatar may have fallen at the first hurdle in their South American adventure but the 2022 World Cup hosts showed enough in Brazil to suggest the future is bright for the Maroons.

They arrived at the Copa America as an unknown quantity as far as the locals were concerned but despite losing two of their three matches, Qatar proved competitive enough to ensure they won't be a surprise package next year when making their second appearance in the South American showpiece.

"There were times that we played well. We have to keep working hard," said Qatar's Spanish coach Felix Sanchez. "It's a young team looking at the next three years. We need to work hard to be strong when we get there."

Qatar have never qualified for the World Cup and will take part for the first time as hosts in 2022. Despite their modest history and tiny indigenous population, the gas-rich Gulf state has lofty ambitions and took a pair of important steps this year.

In February in the United Arab Emirates, they overcame a hostile home crowd-provoked by a political spat in the Gulf region-to win the Asian Cup for the first time, having never before gone beyond the quarter-finals.

And their participation in the Copa America—the oldest continental national team competition in the world—has exposed Qatar to a higher level of tournament than they've ever faced before.

Despite a positive start when they fought back from 2-0 down to draw 2-2 with Paraguay, it proved a chastening experience following defeats by Colombia (1-0) and Argentina (2-0). But Colombia's Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz, who has a lot of experience playing against Qatar having coached Iran for eight years, feels there is more to come.

"Qatar are here to show that there's football in Asia and if you don't respect their characteristics, their teamwork... look what happened with Paraguay," said Queiroz before his side played the Qataris.

"They go to 2-2 and Qatar could have won it." Although Colombia dominated, Qatar held on grimly for 86 minutes and created several chances on the counter-attack before eventually falling to a Duvan Zapata header.

"It was a very difficult match and it was very important to be patient," said Colombia midfielder Gustavo Cuellar after the game. "We managed to counter their threat which was the rapid transition from defense to attack." Qatar's has been a patient project, and many years in the making.

Sanchez, a product of Barcelona's renowned La Masia training center, joined Qatar's Aspire Academy—which aims to develop elite athletes—in 2006. Having coached Qatar's under-19, under-20 and under-23 teams he took over the top job from Uruguayan Jorge Fossati in July 2017. And it's been an immediate success with Qatar beating Japan 3-1 to win the first major title in their history in February. But for bouts of naivety, Qatar could realistically have made the knock-out stages in Brazil.—AFP



BELO HORIZONTE: Ecuador's Angel Mena (C) is marked by Japan's Ayase Ueda (L) as Japan's Ko Itakura look on during their Copa America football tournament group match at the Mineirao Stadium in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. — AFP

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Japan and Ecuador faced a must win match in their bid to reach the knock-out stages as one of the two best third-placed finishers. Peru had already secured their spot from Group A while Paraguay, in Group B, were left sweating on Monday's result having finished their campaign on Sunday with two points from three games.

Shoya Nakajima gave Japan the lead on 15 minutes with a goal validated by VAR, but 10 minutes from half time, Angel Mena equalized for Ecuador. Japan substitute Daizen Maeda was put clean through late on but saw his effort saved by goalkeeper Alexander Dominguez.

Deep into stoppage time teenage sensation Takefusa Kubo had the ball in the net but a dramatic winner was ruled out for offside after consulting VAR.

It meant Japan missed out on goal difference while Ecuador came up a point short. Paraguay will play hosts Brazil in the first quarter-final tomorrow in Porto Alegre. Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu had recalled 18-year-old

Kubo but it was Nakajima who proved the Blue Samurai's most potent weapon, at one point trying to chip Ecuador's goalkeeper from halfway. He and Ecuador's Emmer Valencia both fired early shots over before Nakajima gave Japan a 15th minute lead with a shot from outside the box.

It was originally disallowed but then validated following a VAR review. Japan's Eiji Kawashima saved a shot from Valencia but Ecuador were level on 35 minutes after the veteran goalkeeper failed to hold a Robert Arboleda effort, allowing Angel Mena to tuck home the rebound.

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Nakajima turned provider for Naomichi Ueda in the second half but Dominguez saved the Japan midfielder's header while Kawashima denied Ayrton Preciado. Maeda had a chance to win it in the dying moments when put through by Kubo but couldn't beat Dominguez. And Kubo, nicknamed the "Japanese Messi" saw his hopes of becoming the nation's hero dashed by VAR.

In Rio, Chile knew they needed only a draw to keep hold of top spot in Group C and avoid Colombia—the only team with a perfect group stage record—in the quarter-finals. They took no risks and began with a back three, recalling Gonzalo Jara—no stranger to Uruguay's forwards.

He was involved in a pair of controversial incidents in 2013, when he touched Luis Suarez's testicles during a match, and two years later when he tried to insert a finger in Cavani's backside. Chile, playing with greater urgency, were on top for the first 20 minutes with Alexis Sanchez lashing an early shot over the bar and Uruguay goalkeeper Fernando Muslera saving from Charles Aranguiz and Eduardo Vargas. Uruguay found their feet, though, and Suarez pounced on a defensive mistake to nip around goalkeeper Gabriel Arias, but he was forced wide and the chance was snuffed out.—AFP

Sports

USA, Sweden reach quarter-finals as women's World Cup heats up

Sweden will face Germany on Saturday

PARIS: Megan Rapinoe scored two penalties as defending champions the United States beat Spain on Monday to set up a mouthwatering quarter-final against hosts France at the women's World Cup, with Sweden joining them in the last eight.

On another day in the limelight for VAR, Sweden's goalkeeper Hedvig Lindahl made a brilliant second-half penalty save as her country edged out Canada 1-0 in Paris, meaning they advance to a similarly enticing tie against Germany.

The showdown between the holders and the hosts had seemed inevitable from the moment the draw was made back in December, but after France laboured to beat Brazil in extra time on Sunday, the USA did not find the going easy against Spain in Reims.

Rapinoe's first penalty gave Jill Ellis's team an early lead after Tobin Heath was brought down in the box by Maria Leon.

However, Jennifer Hermoso pounced to equalise moments later after Becky Sauerbrunn had been caught in possession, and Spain held their own after that against the World Cup favourites. They were undone, though, by another penalty awarded for what looked a very slight touch on Rose Lavelle from Virginia Torrecilla.

The penalty was confirmed after a VAR check and Rapinoe smashed the ball into the same corner with 15 minutes left to give the USA the tightest of wins and line up the French. "I hope it's wild and crazy and the fans are crazy and that there's tonnes of media around it and it's just a big spectacle," Rapinoe said of Friday's match. "I think it's going to be incredible for the women's game. You have two heavy hitters meeting in the knockout rounds and this is everything you want."

It is not what Spain wanted, and the penalty that

decided the game left a bitter taste in their mouths.

"I didn't touch her... they blew for that penalty because it was the United States," a distraught Torrecilla said.

In Paris, more than 38,000 fans saw Sweden edge out fifth-ranked Canada 1-0 at the Parc des Princes thanks to a solitary second-half goal scored by Stina Blackstenius, superbly set up by Kosovare Asllani.

Sweden then held on for the victory thanks to Lindahl, who dived to her right to keep out Janine Beckie's 69th-minute penalty awarded after a VAR review showed Asllani had stopped a Desiree Scott shot with her arm.

"I was so happy, just pure joy, and my teammates felt the same way," said Lindahl, when asked to describe her emotions after saving the spot-kick.

That was the 22nd penalty awarded at this World Cup, equalling the total tally from the 2015 tournament and underlining the influence of Video Assistant Referees, although VAR later intervened to overturn a spot-kick awarded to Sweden.

Sweden will face Germany on Saturday in a repeat of the gold medal match at the 2016 Olympics, which the Germans won 2-1. "I had the best preparation today that you could have for a match like that. I listened to four albums by Neil Young, who is Canada's top performer," said Sweden coach Peter Gerhardsson.

Asked what music he would listen to before facing Germany, Gerhardsson went for some industrial metal. "It will be Rammstein. They released a new album and it will be heavy going on Saturday so that will work just fine." Today the last two quarter-final places will be decided as Italy take on China in Montpellier before European champions the Netherlands meet 2011 World Cup winners Japan in Rennes. The temperature



PARIS: Sweden's forward Stina Blackstenius (C) celebrates after scoring a goal during the France 2019 Women's World Cup round of sixteen football match between Sweden and Canada, at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. — AFP

could be a particular concern in the first of those matches as a heatwave grips much of France. In Paris on Monday night, the temperature remained close to 30 degrees Celsius (86 Fahrenheit) after the match

kicked off at 9pm local time, and it is set to get hotter in the coming days. FIFA said that "cooling breaks" may be needed during games to protect players from the effects of the heat. — AFP

Neymar accepts pay-cut in 'verbal agreement' with Barca: Reports

MADRID: Neymar is ready to cut his salary by 12 million euros to leave Paris Saint-Germain as part of a "verbal agreement" reached between the Brazilian

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