

## Sports

# Ronaldo helps Portugal past Luxembourg in World Cup qualifiers

## Belgians join Qatar protests in Belarus rout

**PARIS:** Cristiano Ronaldo helped Portugal to a hard-fought 3-1 win over Luxembourg on Tuesday with his first goal of the 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign, while Belgium became the latest team to join the protests over human rights in Qatar before hitting eight past Belarus.

Juventus forward Ronaldo bagged his 103rd international goal five minutes after the break to stop his side falling foul of a Luxembourg team whose recent performances have defied their small status and tiny population.

Ronaldo had been controversially denied what looked to have been an added-time winner in Saturday's draw against Serbia in Belgrade, but he was not to be denied when he tapped home Joao Cancelo's cross.

Luxembourg beat the Republic of Ireland last time out and another shock result looked possible when Gerson Rodrigues put the hosts in the lead with a glancing header half an hour into the Group A contest at the Stade Josy Barthel.

Diogo Jota put the European champions back on level terms in first-half stoppage time with a close-range header of his own, finding himself unmarked to nod home Pedro Neto's cross. Ronaldo put Portugal ahead and then Joao Palhinha added a third to save Portugal's blushes and put them top, level on seven points with Serbia, who won 2-1 at Azerbaijan earlier on Tuesday thanks to an Aleksandar Mitrovic brace.

The 36-year-old Ronaldo is now six goals short of Iranian Ali Daei's all-time record of 109 international strikes. "The goal before half-time came at the worst time," said Luxembourg coach Luc Holtz. "That is the turning point because I would have liked to return to the dressing room at 1-0. After, the

individual quality made the difference."

### Belgium join Qatar protests

Belgium's players donned t-shirts in support of migrant workers building the stadiums for next year's finals in the Gulf state and then smashed Belarus 8-0 to move top of Group E despite coach Roberto Martinez playing a second-string side.

Germany, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands have recently staged similar protests, and the Belgian gesture mirrors the one made by their Dutch neighbors with t-shirts emblazoned with the message 'Football supports change'. Human rights groups have been critical of the treatment of migrant workers, claims Qatar disputes.

On the field in Leuven Belgium made easy work of their opponents, Michy Batshuayi starting a deluge of goals in the 14th minute. Two braces from Hans Vanaken and Leandro Trossard — the Brighton winger's first for his country — and further strikes from Jeremy Doku, Dennis Praet and Christian Benteke gave Belgium a thumping win. It leaves them three points ahead of the second-placed Czech Republic after they lost 1-0 to Wales in Cardiff in a match which finished with 10 men on each side.

### Dutch close in on Turkey

The Netherlands closed the gap on Group G leaders Turkey to one point after they won 7-0 in Gibraltar. Frank de Boer's team were far from their best but got maximum points after taking a long time to break down their minnow opponents, who were playing in front of a home crowd thanks to Gibraltar's successful coronavirus vaccine program.

Steven Berghuis opened the scoring three min-



**LUXEMBOURG:** Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo scores a goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification Group A football match between Luxembourg and Portugal at the Josy Barthel Stadium, in Luxembourg City, on Tuesday. —AFP

utes before the break and in the second half the Dutch managed to make their superiority count. Luuk de Jong made it two with a 55th-minute tap-in and then three goals in as many minutes from Memphis Depay, Georginio Wijnaldum and Donyell Malen put the Dutch five ahead.

Donny van de Beek lashed home the sixth from close range before Depay added his second of the night to complete the scoring with two minutes

remaining. They move closer to the Turks, who beat the Netherlands in the group's opening round of fixtures, thanks to Davis Ikauniek's late strike which allowed Latvia to draw 3-3 in Istanbul. The Dutch are level on six points with Norway and Montenegro, who lost 1-0 at home to the Norwegians. Croatia moved top of Group H thanks to their 3-0 win over Malta. They are level on six points with Russia, who fell to a 2-1 defeat at Slovakia. —AFP

## Benin refuse to play in COVID row, referee collapses

**JOHANNESBURG:** Benin refused to play a key Africa Cup of Nations qualifier in Sierra Leone Tuesday after challenging positive COVID-19 tests for five of their players. A dramatic final day of qualifying for the 2021 tournament in Cameroon also saw a referee collapse, leading to a match between the Ivory Coast and Ethiopia being abandoned 10 minutes from time.

There were five qualifying places up for grabs and Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania took four with Benin or Sierra Leone set to join them. Rows over COVID-19 tests have plagued African football since last year with host national teams and clubs accused of producing false positive results to deprive opponents of stars.

Talks between Sierra Leone, Benin and Confederation of African Football (CAF) officials in Freetown failed to resolve the standoff as both squads remained in their hotels. Benin hold a three-point lead over Sierra Leone in Group L and both teams have a chance of finishing runners-up to Nigeria.

Meanwhile, Ghanaian referee Charles Bulu collapsed 80 minutes into a Group K match in Abidjan and was removed on a stretcher and taken to hospital. His condition was not immediately known. Originally chosen as the fourth official, Bulu handled the game because a fellow Ghanaian failed to arrive at the match venue. An Ivorian was drafted in as the fourth official, but Ethiopia questioned his neutrality as a replacement for Bulu and refused to continue playing.

### Madagascar fail

Ethiopia, who were trailing 3-1 at the time, still



**ANYAMA:** Rescuers carry Ghanaian referee Charles Bemle Bulu after a discomfort during the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations qualifying football match between Ivory Coast and Ethiopia at the Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Anyama on Tuesday. — AFP

qualified as shock 2019 quarter-finalists Madagascar were held 0-0 in Toamasina and had to settle for third place. Willy Boly and Franck Kessie gave the Ivorians a two-goal half-time advantage and after Getaneh Kebede reduced arrears on 74 minutes, Jean Kouassi quickly scored a third goal for the hosts.

Guinea-Bissau beat Congo Brazzaville 3-0 in Bissau to overtake them and claim the second Group I ticket to the finals behind Senegal. Piqueti broke the deadlock on the stroke of half-time and Frederic Mendy and Jorginho netted in the closing stages to seal a third straight qualification.

A Faisal Bangal own-goal condemned Mozambique to a 1-0 defeat in Maputo by Cape

### More clubs

The changes are essentially all about creating a new format for the group stage, replacing the existing structure in place since 2003. At the moment 32 clubs enter the group stage and are split into eight groups of four teams, who play each other home and away with the top two in each group advancing to the last 16.

It is understood the plans will see the number of teams in the group stage increase to 36, with discussions ongoing about who the additional berths will go to. British newspaper The Times reported that two extra spots will go to the clubs with the best coefficient who fail to qualify via domestic competitions but have qualified for the second-tier Europa League.

However European Leagues, a body representing the interests of clubs and leagues in 30 countries, is against places being attributed on historical merit and insists the make-up of European competitions "should reflect the current state of domestic competition". France, which is Europe's fifth-ranked nation but currently only has two guaranteed places in the group stage, should get an extra spot.

### The 'Swiss system'

The plans will see a complete overhaul of how the group stage works. Teams will all be placed into one giant pool and will each play 10 games in a so-called 'Swiss system' more commonly associated with chess. For the draw clubs will be split into four pots of nine based on UEFA coefficients. Teams will play against 10 different sides, with five games at home and five away. At the end of this phase, the top eight sides will go through to the last 16, with the bottom 12 eliminated. Meanwhile the sides finishing between ninth and 24th position will play two-legged play-offs, with those between ninth and 16th drawn against a side finishing from 17th to 24th. The winners of those ties will complete the last-16 line-up, with the losers dropping into the Europa League. — AFP

## What will reformed UEFA Champions League look like?

**PARIS:** Plans to radically reform the UEFA Champions League are set to be confirmed in April, despite a delay caused by certain leading European clubs looking for more say over commercial rights. An announcement had been expected at an executive committee meeting of European football's governing body on Wednesday, but UEFA said no official decision would be taken before April 19.

A statement late on Tuesday from the powerful European Club Association (ECA) revealed it had been behind the setback. The ECA, whose chairman is Andrea Agnelli, also the chairman of Juventus, said it "unanimously agreed that it was not yet in a position to formally endorse key changes... for the period post 2024 in isolation."

"If European football is to meet the challenges it currently faces," the statement added, "the foundations for ECA and UEFA's future relationship also need to be given due consideration at the same time." According to sources close to the negotiations, certain leading clubs want greater control of UEFA Club Competitions (UCC), the subsidiary company which advises UEFA itself on commercial matters.

Half of the board members of UCC are appointed by UEFA. The other half are appointed by the ECA. The current protocol defining the relationship between the ECA and UEFA is also set for renewal in 2024, hence the sticking point. However, plans for what the reformed version of European football's elite club competition — supposed to stave off the threat of a breakaway Super League — will look like are already an open secret. This is how things are set to change:

Verde, who qualified from Group F behind a Cameroon team that drew 0-0 with 10-man Rwanda in Douala. Aoubakar Kamara scored in first-half stoppage time for Mauritania to earn a 1-0 win over the Central African Republic in Bangui.

In matches where only pride was at stake, Senegal needed a stoppage-time Cheikhou Kouyate goal to salvage a 1-1 draw with Eswatini in Thies and Nigeria outplayed Lesotho 3-0 in Lagos. Victor Osimhen netted for the fifth time in qualifying to give the Nigerians a half-time advantage that was stretched by goals from Oghenekaro Etebo and Paul Onuachu. Group E winners Morocco defeated Burundi 1-0 in another dead rubber with Munir el Haddadi netting just before half-time. — AFP

## Saudis ease past Palestine in 2022 World Cup qualifier

**DOHA:** Saudi Arabia eased past Palestine 5-0 on Tuesday to go top of Group D in the second round of Asian qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The two sides had featured in a goalless draw when they clashed earlier in the competition at Al Ram in 2019, but the Asian giants proved far superior on their home turf with Saleh Al-Shehri grabbing a second-half brace at the King Saud University Stadium in Riyadh.

Earlier, Yasser Al-Shahrani found himself in a perfect position to score with a header to put the Saudis ahead in the 37th minute after Palestine goalkeeper Toufic Ali failed to collect a cross by Fahad Al-Muwallad. Muwallad increased the lead six minutes later as the Palestinians started wilting under sustained pressure, the winger scoring on his second attempt after his initial effort after a back-heel pass by Shehri was deflected by goalkeeper Ali.

Shehri then grabbed two goals within a space of seven minutes early in the second half, taking his personal tally to three in just his fourth cap with the senior team. Saudi captain Salem Al-Dawsari completed the rout with an 88th-minute penalty after Palestinian defender Ahmed Qatmish had handled the ball.

The three points took Saudi Arabia's tally to 11 after five matches, overtaking Uzbekistan who have nine. The Palestinians had shocked Uzbekistan 2-0 in their opening match and forced a draw against Saudi Arabia for their four points, but are now languishing at the bottom of the group after failing to build on their fine start. The remaining matches will be played in Saudi Arabia in June in a centralized format due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Buffon banned one match

**MILAN:** Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon was on Tuesday handed a one-match ban for blasphemy which would rule him out of next weekend's Turin derby. The 43-year-old Italian World Cup winner had been fined 5,000 euros (\$6,000) last month by the Italian Football Federation, but escaped a ban. However, the FIGC's Court of Appeal upheld the Federal Prosecutor's appeal and imposed a ban, meaning Buffon will be ruled out of Saturday's game at Torino. Buffon was overheard using a "blasphemous expression" towards teammate Manolo Portanova during Juve's 4-0 league win over Parma on December 19. — AFP

#### Rice demands action

**LONDON:** Declan Rice on Tuesday said England players could consider boycotting social media in the future if the current abuse of Premier League stars is not resolved. Former Arsenal and France star Thierry Henry left all of his platforms earlier this week after saying enough had not been done to tackle racist abuse across social media sites. A host of Premier League players including Manchester United duo Marcus Rashford and Anthony Martial and Chelsea's Reece James have been subjected to vile online taunts. Calls for social media companies to take stronger action against internet trolls have so far produced an underwhelming response in the eyes of many Premier League players. — AFP

#### Lazio lose appeal

**MILAN:** Lazio lost on Tuesday their appeal against a decision not to punish Torino for failing to travel to Rome for their Serie A fixture because of a coronavirus outbreak. Italian football chiefs rejected Lazio's appeal, confirming the match which was due to take place on March 2 would now be rescheduled. Regional authorities in Turin had placed Torino under quarantine after eight of their players tested positive for the UK variant of COVID-19, but Serie A refused to postpone the match. After a 45-minute wait, Lazio players were informed by the referee that Torino were considered to have forfeited and the match had been abandoned. — AFP

#### 2026 Olympics logo unveiled

**MILAN:** Organizers for the 2026 Milano-Cortina Olympics on Tuesday unveiled the 'Futura' logo for the Winter Games following a public vote. Featuring the numbers two and six in a single trace like ice against a white background, the logo won 75 percent of the vote over a second 'Dado' design, a dice featuring the red and green colors of the Italian flag. A total of 871,566 people from 169 countries cast their vote in the online ballot, the first of its type for an Olympic logo, organizers of Milano-Cortina 2026 said. The logo represents sustainability and the future is a victory for all. — AFP