

Sports

Kane fires England to brink of Qatar, Italy held by Switzerland

England needs one point from San Marino match to qualify

LONDON: Harry Kane scored a first half hat-trick as England romped towards the 2022 World Cup with a 5-0 thrashing of Albania, but Italy still have work to do to reach Qatar after a 1-1 draw with Switzerland.

England still need a point to mathematically qualify when they visit San Marino tomorrow, but boast a three-point lead and six-goal advantage on goal difference over Poland, who sealed at least a playoff place with a 4-1 win over 10-man Andorra.

The Three Lions can look ahead to Qatar with confidence as they bounced back to form at Wembley in style with all the goals coming before half-time. "The first half was fantastic, as well as we've played for a long time," said England boss Gareth Southgate. "We're best when we have an edge and this was a game that could put us on the verge of qualification for the World Cup."

Harry Maguire put a difficult start to the season at club level behind him as the Manchester United captain opened the floodgates with a thumping header from Reece James' free-kick. Kane admitted on Thursday to also struggling physically and mentally from the exertions of England's run to the Euro 2020 final added to the speculation over his future.

The England captain has scored just one Premier League goal this season, but now has six in five games for his country. Kane headed home Jordan Henderson's cross from close range before turning

provider for Henderson to calmly slot home his first international goal on home soil.

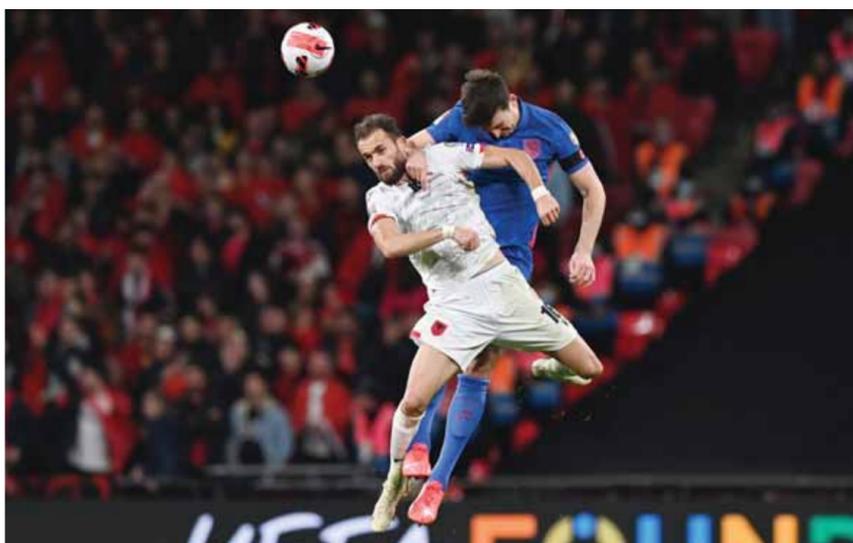
England were rampant in the first 45 minutes as Kane thrashed home his second from a narrow angle before completing his fourth international hat-trick in spectacular fashion with a scissor kick from Phil Foden's corner. Kane is now level with Jimmy Greaves as England's fourth highest goalscorer of all time on 44 and moved ahead of Wayne Rooney with the most competitive goals for the Three Lions.

Italy pay late penalty

European champions Italy maintained a narrow advantage over Switzerland at the top of Group C, but missed a glorious late chance to virtually secure qualification when Jorginho blazed a penalty over the bar. The Chelsea midfielder has now missed six spot-kicks for club and country since the start of last season. "If he felt like shooting, it is

right that he took the penalty," said Italy manager Roberto Mancini. The visitors got off to a flying start in Rome when Silvan Widmer's thunderous strike flew into the top corner. The Azzurri levelled nine minutes before half-time thanks to a well-worked set-piece that was headed in by Giovanni Di Lorenzo.

Italy were given a controversial late spot-kick after a VAR review for a push on Domenico Berardi by Ulisses Garcia. Jorginho also missed from the spot when the sides drew 0-0 in



LONDON: Albania's forward Sokol Cikalleshi (left) vies with England's defender Harry Maguire (right) during the FIFA World Cup 2022 Group I qualifier football match between England and Albania at Wembley Stadium in London on Friday. —AFP

September and fired well off target. Italy hold a two-goal advantage over the Swiss on goal difference heading into today's final games. Northern Ireland host Italy, while Switzerland face Bulgaria at home.

Scotland guaranteed a playoff place behind

already-qualified Denmark in Group F with a comfortable 2-0 win in Moldova. Nathan Patterson and Che Adams either side of half-time as Steve Clarke's men secured a fifth consecutive win. Denmark beat the Faroe Islands 3-1 to maintain their 100 percent record. —AFP



Scotland guarantees playoff place

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News in brief

Aguero denies 'rumors'

BARCELONA: Barcelona forward Sergio Aguero has dismissed as rumors reports a heart condition had ended his playing career, insisting he hoped to be back in action within three months. The 33-year-old Argentine was rushed to hospital on October 30 after suffering breathing problems while playing in the Liga draw against Alaves. The club said after he underwent heart tests that Aguero would be "unavailable for selection and during the next three months the effectiveness of treatment will be evaluated to determine his recovery process." Catalunya Radio however reported on Friday that Aguero would never play again "due to a serious heart problem." The former Manchester City star took to Twitter to deny the reports. "Always positive," said Aguero. "There are rumors going around but I'm following the club doctor's opinion and we'll see how I am in 90 days."

'Not a bad idea'

TUBIZE: Manchester City attacker Kevin De Bruyne said on Friday a proposal to hold the World Cup every two years was "not a bad idea." FIFA's biennial World Cup scheme was mooted earlier this year by former Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger, who now works as chief of global football development for the governing body. The proposition has been widely criticized by the likes of UEFA and the Premier League. FIFA plans to publish a report in November, before a "global summit" by the end of the year. "At the start of the season, I had a meeting with FIFA and Arsene Wenger to explain to us what they wanted to do," De Bruyne told news agency Belga. "The idea isn't bad in itself, as long as everyone works together," he added.

Iran footballers complain

TEHRAN: Iran's footballers, well-placed to reach the World Cup 2022 finals in Qatar, feel they are being taken for granted by their national federation. "Our victories have become a normal thing (for the federation). Instead of giving us more support, they've completely forgotten us," the players lamented in posts on Instagram. "The people need to be informed of the excessive problems faced by the national team," players wrote. This state of affairs is "not at all worthy of our country's name". Iran beat Lebanon 2-1 away on Thursday, leaving them at the top of Group A in Asian qualifiers for next year's finals. "We've been using old shirts for the past year," players said. The federation reacted quickly to the posts, with spokesman Hossein Sharifi saying on state television its president was working to resolve any problems faced by Team Melli.

Alves agrees Barca return under Xavi

BARCELONA: Barcelona announced on Friday that veteran defender Dani Alves will be returning to the club as new coach Xavi Hernandez's first signing. Alves, 38, has been a free agent since leaving Sao Paulo in September but is ineligible until the transfer window opens early next window. He played for the Camp Nou outfit between 2008-2016 when he lifted the Champions League title three times alongside Xavi.

"Barcelona and Dani Alves have reached an agreement in principle for the player to join the football first team for the remainder of the current season," they said. "The Brazilian will be joining training from next week but will not be able to play until January. In the Catalan capital, he made the right back slot his own across eight seasons, making

391 official appearances and scoring 23 goals.

"Alves has also played for Brazil, winning six major titles, most recently the Tokyo Olympic Games, where he lined up in the final against what are now his team-mates Oscar Mingueza, Eric Garcia and Pedri," they added.

Alves will compete with USA youngster Sergino Dest for a starting berth with Spain center-back Oscar Mingueza also able to cover at right-back. Xavi was presented as the club's new boss on Monday to replace the sacked Ronald Koeman returning to the side where he won eight La Liga titles and four Champions Leagues as a player.

Despite club debts of more than a billion euros (\$1.16billion), Xavi is tasked with returning Barcelona to Europe's elite and recovering a style of play most associated with Johan Cruyff and Pep Guardiola. Xavi's priority this term will be to ensure Barcelona qualify for next season's Champions League by finishing in La Liga's top four.

They also face a fight to make the last 16 of this



Dani Alves

season's tournament, with a crunch game away to Benfica to come later this month. The Catalans' next match after the international break is on November 20 at home against city rivals Espanyol. —AFP

PSG player arrested over teammate's attack denies involvement

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain women's footballer Aminata Diallo on Friday denied any involvement in a street attack on her teammate Kheira Hamraoui, in her first public statement about an incident that has shaken the Qatar-owned club.

Diallo was driving fellow midfielder Hamraoui home on Thursday evening last week near Paris after dinner when her car was stopped by two masked men. They dragged Hamraoui out and beat her with a metal bar on her legs, meaning she was unable to play this week in PSG's Champions League clash with Real Madrid. Diallo was detained by police at her home on Wednesday and held for nearly 35 hours before being released without charge, with investigators looking into whether on-field rivalry might explain the violence.

Diallo "hopes that judicial authorities conclude their investigation quickly and is sure that this will end up showing her complete and total innocence," a statement issued by her lawyer said on Friday. The statement denounced a "totally artificial suggestion of a rivalry between her and Mme Kheira Hamraoui that would explain why she would target her teammate. This theory does not reflect at all the reality of their relationship."

French media reported that Hamraoui had raised the alarm about Diallo when she filed a police complaint about the attack, highlighting the unusual route

taken by her teammate and the slow speed of their vehicle when the attackers sprang out.

A man already in jail over a separate assault case in the southeastern city of Lyon — a friend of Diallo's — was also arrested as part of the investigation before he too was released without charge on Thursday evening. Diallo criticized the "media speculation which has already condemned her, without justification, and she will not hesitate to launch legal action if necessary against any defamation."

"Other far more serious theories are now being explored by investigators that do not involve my client," the statement from lawyer Mourad Battikh said. Her detention overnight at a police station in Versailles outside Paris was also unnecessary "given that she could have made a statement without being subjected to constraint," he said.

'Friends'

Given the manner of the attack on Hamraoui and the arrest of Diallo, commentators had recalled a notorious assault on American ice skater Nancy Kerrigan in the run-up to the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics. Her rival Tonya Harding was banned for life after her ex-husband and bodyguard hired a hitman to club Kerrigan in the leg.

Diallo, 26, and Hamraoui, 31, were



PARIS: This combination of file photographs shows France's Kheira Hamraoui (left) and Aminata Diallo. —AFP

described by club sources as friends who even holidayed together, despite their competition for the central midfield berth in the PSG team. Hamraoui, a capped French international like Diallo, returned to the French club in the summer from Barcelona where she won the Champions League last year.

Unable to play in Tuesday night's clash with Real Madrid after her assault, she was replaced in the team by Diallo who played most of the match before being substituted in the 89th minute. Neither player attended the team's train-

ing session on Friday, the club said.

PSG, who have invested heavily in their women's team, asked for the table-topping clash with Lyon today to be postponed but the French football federation turned down the request. French football has also been rocked in recent years by allegations that star attacker Karim Benzema took part in an attempt to blackmail national teammate Mathieu Valbuena with a sex tape. Benzema, who went on trial last month, denies the allegations. A verdict is expected on November 24. —AFP

Indian doctor calls Pakistan opener Rizwan's recovery 'miraculous'

DUBAI: Pakistan opener Mohammad Rizwan's recovery from a lung infection to make a valiant innings in the Twenty20 World Cup semi-final was termed "miraculous" yesterday by the Indian doctor who treated him. Rizwan, 29, came out of the intensive care unit of a Dubai hospital to top-score with 67 in Pakistan's 176-4 on Thursday, but his efforts were in vain as Australia overhauled that total to set up a title clash with New Zealand.

Rizwan's courage was lauded by Pakistan's batting

coach Matthew Hayden and by fans, while pictures of the batsman lying in a hospital bed went viral on social media. Saheer Sainalabdeen, a pulmonologist who hails from the south Indian state of Kerala, told AFP it was Rizwan's "faith in God" and desire to play for Pakistan that got the batsman through a severe chest infection. Rizwan was so grateful that he sent the doctor an autographed Pakistan shirt. "I must admit that we did not expect his recovery to be so fast as it takes around five to seven days for improvement with the kind of condition that he came in with," Sainalabdeen told AFP. "But because of his fit lifestyle, of course he is a sportsman, he improved in two to three days and it was miraculous. Main thing I thought was his faith in God and his strong belief to play in the World Cup for his country."

Sainalabdeen said Rizwan was admitted to the

hospital on November 9 with severe chest pain and doctors suspected heart issues but later it turned out to be spasm of the lungs and food pipe. "It all started with cough and cold but November 9 he had severe chest pain and we had a doubt of him having heart issues," he said. "But then the evaluation found out that he had severe throat infection which led to spasm of the lungs and food pipe. Because of which he had severe pain and breathing difficulty."

Once Rizwan was passed fit, he tore into the Australian bowling in Thursday's semi-final, taking nine balls to get going with skipper Babar Azam as he hit Josh Hazlewood for six. The batsman smashed three fours and four sixes in a 52-ball blitz before his dismissal in the 18th over. He jumped to second in the tournament's batting chart with 281 runs in six matches, behind only Babar's 303 runs. —AFP