



LISBON: Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo reacts during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification group A football match between Portugal and Serbia, at the Luz stadium in Lisbon, on Sunday. — AFP

Serbia, Spain qualify for 2022 World Cup, Portugal stunned

LISBON: Cristiano Ronaldo's hopes of playing in a record-equaling fifth World Cup hang in the balance after Serbia stunned Portugal 2-1 in Lisbon to qualify for the 2022 World Cup. Spain and Croatia did secure their places in Qatar on Sunday thanks to 1-0 wins over Sweden and Russia respectively.

Ronaldo already holds the record of playing in five European Championships and looked well on course for another milestone as Portugal stormed out of the blocks to open the scoring after just two minutes through Renato Sanches.

However, Serbia bounced back to dominate the remainder of the first half and deservedly levelled when Dusan Tadic's strike squeezed in off the post after Dusan Vlahovic had hit the woodwork. Ronaldo was kept quiet as another chance to score his 800th career goal came and went. Instead it was Aleksandar Mitrovic who grabbed the vital goal as stoppage time approached.

Just over a year ago, Mitrovic was the villain for his country as he was the only player to fail to score in a penalty shootout against Scotland that

saw Serbia miss out on Euro 2020. However, the Fulham striker made amends in dramatic fashion when he steered in Tadic's header at the back post. "It was an amazing game," said Mitrovic. "We were the better team today in every aspect of the game."

Portugal must now navigate two tricky one-off playoff matches in March to maintain their record of qualifying for every major tournament since the 1998 World Cup.

'Huge weight off'

"We must apologize to the Portuguese but my team will be at the World Cup, that's guaranteed," said defiant Portugal coach Fernando Santos. "We will have to prepare well to beat our opponents in March and to get to Qatar. But I always trust my players."



Croatia beat Russia to qualify

Spain made sure they avoided the playoffs as Alvaro Morata's goal four minutes from time ended Sweden's resistance in Seville. The Swedes' shock 2-0 defeat to Kazakhstan on Thursday had handed Spain pole position in Group B, meaning La Roja just needed a point to qualify.

Luis Enrique's men were grateful for that reprieve as for a long time a repeat of the stalemate between the sides when they met in the group stages of Euro 2020 was on the cards. Morata was the fall guy that night for missing a host of chances, but made his mark off the bench with a calm finish after Robin Olsen had turned Dani Olmo's blistering shot onto the bar. "To be honest, it is a huge weight off my shoulders," said Luis Enrique. "I felt much more

pressure in these games when people think it is easy to get a result than in the Euro or the Nations League."

Croatia also needed a late winner as its own goal from Fedor Kudryashov snatched qualification from Russia in a battle in boggy conditions in Split. Finalists at the last World Cup in 2018, Croatia looked bound for the playoffs as they toiled on a waterlogged pitch against a resolute Russian defense.

But Kudryashov's error saw them snatch top spot from the visitors eight minutes from time. "It was a difficult match from the beginning because of the rain. We never gave up, we were patient and I think we won deservedly. We are the best team in this group," said Croatia captain Luka Modric.

Germany had long since booked their place in Qatar, but rounded off their qualifying campaign with a 4-1 thrashing of Armenia as Ilkay Gundogan scored twice. North Macedonia secured the playoff place behind the four-time world champions with a 3-1 win over Iceland. — AFP



ZEIST: Netherlands' National coach Louis van Gaal attends his team's training session from a golf cart yesterday in Zeist, as part of the team's preparation for the World Cup qualifying match against Norway. — AFP

Dutch World Cup woes deepen after Van Gaal hurts hip

THE HAGUE: The Dutch campaign to qualify for next year's World Cup suffered another blow after coach Louis van Gaal fell and injured his hip. Dutch media reported yesterday. Van Gaal, 70, cycled to his hotel after a training session ahead of the team's crucial qualifier against Norway today when the accident happened.

"Van Gaal was parking his bicycle at the hotel when he slipped and landed on his hip," De Telegraaf daily tabloid said. "A visit to the hospital confirmed he did not need surgery," the paper said, but a Royal Dutch Football Federation (KNVB) official told the paper "Louis can't walk and is in a wheelchair."

"He will do everything he can to make today's game," the official said. Van Gaal, sometimes nicknamed the "Iron Tulip" for his no-nonsense approach to coaching, arrived at yesterday's training session in a golf cart. The KNVB could not immediately be reached for comment.

Van Gaal's injury is the latest blow in the Netherlands' quest to get to Qatar. The

team captained by Liverpool central defender Virgil van Dijk squandered a 2-0 lead on Saturday against Montenegro after the hosts equalised with two goals in the last 10 minutes of the game, robbing the Dutch of a guaranteed ticket to Qatar.

The Dutch still head Group G but are just two points ahead of Turkey, who thrashed Gibraltar 6-0 on Sunday. The Orange face Norway in Rotterdam today in the final round of matches while Turkey travel to Montenegro. If the Dutch beat Norway, they will be assured of a place in Qatar and even a draw could see them through, but they could be eliminated if they lose, missing out on a second successive World Cup finals. — AFP

Disputed Ayew penalty takes Ghana to playoffs, DR Congo also qualify

JOHANNESBURG: Captain Andre Ayew converted a controversial penalty in his 100th international appearance on Sunday to take Ghana into the African World Cup qualifying playoffs with a bruising 1-0 victory over South Africa. The former West Ham United midfielder sent rival skipper Ronwen Williams the wrong way from the spot kick in Cape Coast on 33 minutes for the lone goal of the Group G decider.

Ghana were awarded the penalty when the Senegalese referee ruled that Leicester City defender Daniel Amartey had been pushed, but TV replays suggested the home player dived. Ghana and South Africa tied on 13 points and both had plus-four goal differences, but the Black Stars won the section because they scored seven goals, one more than South Africa, over six rounds.

Ethiopia finished third after Abubeker Nasir netted four minutes from time to snatch a 1-1 draw with Zimbabwe in Harare. Kudakwashe Mahachi had put the hosts ahead before half-time with a long-range strike that whistled past goalkeeper Teklemariam Shanko. The Democratic Republic of Congo also progressed to the playoffs after defeating Benin 2-0 in Kinshasa through goals from Dieumerci Mbokani and Ben Malango to win Group J.

Ghana and DR Congo join Egypt, Mali, Morocco and Senegal in the

playoffs, along with four other group winners to be decided today. The contenders are African champions Algeria and Burkina Faso (Group A), Tunisia, Equatorial Guinea and Zambia (Group B), Nigeria and Cape Verde (Group C) and Ivory Coast and Cameroon (Group D).

In Kinshasa, Mbokani converted a 10th-minute penalty in a match the Congolese Leopards had to win to overtake Benin, and a Malango header on 74 minutes sealed maximum points.

Mbokani boosts DR Congo

Kuwait-based Mbokani quit the national team four years ago, but was persuaded by fellow forward Cedric Bakambu to return for the World Cup campaign and has scored four goals. Reaching the final stage on the road to Qatar is a huge boost to DR Congo after failing to qualify for the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon, which has been postponed until January because of COVID-19. Veteran DR Congo coach Hector Cuper is seeking a second straight appearance at the global football showpiece after the Argentine guided Egypt at the 2018 tournament in Russia. Cuper was dismissed when Egypt, handicapped by an injury that limited the game time of star forward Mohamed Salah, lost all three group games. — AFP