

Sports

Zaha sends Ivory Coast into last 8; Mali fluff their lines

Victory sets up quarter-final against Algeria

SUEZ: Ivory Coast forward Wilfried Zaha secured a 1-0 win over Mali with a late goal in their Africa Cup of Nations last 16 clash on Monday after their opponents had dominated most of the game and missed a flurry of chances. Zaha, who had barely featured until then, took advantage as the Mali defence got into a terrible mess from a free kick deep in the Ivorian half in the 76th minute to earn his side a barely deserved win and quarter-final tie against Algeria.

Mali, unbeaten in the group stage, had not beaten their southern neighbours in a competitive match since 1977 but for most of the contest seemed to believe they could end that run. They played with verve and skill and bossed the first hour with Moussa Djenepo and Abdoulaye Diaby causing endless trouble down the flanks and Moussa Marega a constant threat in attack while Ivory Coast keeper Sylvain Gbohouo lived a charmed life.

He allowed a comer to slip through his fingers but Diaby could not react quickly enough at the far post and turned the ball wide. Moments later, Gbohouo was nearly caught out by a long-range Diaby free kick but managed to turn the ball over. Hamari Traore surged into the Ivorian penalty area only to blast his shot towards the Suez Canal before Djenepo created Mali's best first half chance with another run down the

left but Marega missed from six meters. "We let the storm pass during the first half before we reorganised in the second," said relieved Ivory Coast coach Ibrahima Kamara.

Another opportunity went begging at the start of the second period as Marega slipped the ball to Djenepo who had a free run on goal but lost his footing when he seemed poised to score. Mali began to run out of gas as the Ivory Coast, whose current side is a shadow of the so-called golden generation which won the tournament in 2015, came back into the game. Jonathan Kodjia should have put the Ivorians ahead when he was sent clear but sent his shot straight at goalkeeper Djigui Diarra who was already on the ground fearing the worst.

But there was no let off shortly afterwards. Gbohouo took a free kick deep inside the Ivorian half, the Malian defense missed the ball and it bounced into the path of Crystal Palace forward Zaha who scored his second goal at the finals. Adama Traore had a shot blocked by Gbohouo in stoppage time but by then Mali's confidence had been replaced by desperation. "I am disappointed like all my team mates because we deserved more," said man-of-the-match Marega. "We were the better side in the game. We could have gone to the break with a good lead but that's a pity for us. We feel disappointed." — Reuters



SUEZ: Ivory Coast's forward Jonathan Kodjia (left) fights for the ball with Mali's defender Molla Wague during the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) Round of 16 football match between Ivory Coast and Mali on July 8, 2019. — AFP

No Neymar, no problem as Brazil begin Copa reign

RIO DE JANEIRO: As Brazil geared up for the Copa America last month, a Neymar-induced pall of doom and gloom threatened to scupper the host nation's chances before a ball had even been kicked. The unrelenting circus surrounding the captain and talisman of the Selecao had included lurid rape revelations before an ankle injury in a warm-up game left the Paris Saint-Germain striker on crutches and out of the tournament.

It was an eerie echo of Brazil's disastrous 2014 World Cup on home soil, when Neymar was injured in the quarter-finals and missed his team's traumatic 7-1 humiliation against eventual champions Germany in the last four. Yet as this year's Copa campaign unfolded, Brazil demonstrated that it might have finally cast off the longstanding criticisms of "Neymar-dependency."

While Neymar's creative spark was sorely missing in a dour 0-0 draw with Venezuela during the group stage, Brazil gradually grew into the tournament. And by the time captain Dani Alves hoisted the trophy — Brazil's first major honor in 12 years — following the 3-1 victory over Peru in the final at the iconic Maracana stadium on Sunday, Neymar had at last been shoved aside as the Copa's major talking point.

What's more, Brazil had proved in finishing with the tournament's best attack, best defense, top player in Alves, top scorer in Everton and top goalkeeper in Alisson — a clean sweep of every award going — that they could thrive without Neymar. Its importance was not lost on Liverpool's Alisson, no matter how diplomatically he put it. "It was difficult without Neymar because he's very talented and also brings a lot to the collective," said Alisson. "It was important to win to show the strength of the group. Sometimes he gets all the attention and we're a bit left out... but he's much loved."

Led by example

Crucially, two of the players thrust into the spotlight by Neymar's absence and indiscretions sparked in the limelight. In May, Alves was named captain for the tournament after Neymar hit the headlines — pre-rape allegations — for the wrong reasons with his club, picking up European and domestic bans for petulant behavior.

He had an altercation with a fan after PSG lost the French Cup final to Rennes while the month before he insulted a match official after the French side's Champions League elimination by Manchester United.

Alves led by example and was named player of the tournament, while his skill and trickery in starting the move that led to the first goal in Brazil's 2-0 semi-final victory over Argentina was sublime. The other player to take his chance was Everton, the crowd-pleasing winger who regularly lifted fans onto their feet with his direct running and determined dribbling. He finished the Copa as top scorer and a star for the present rather than the future. But he may never have been given the chance to shine had Neymar been there.

Had Neymar been available, Everton may have found himself further down the pecking order and given fewer opportunities to impress. Instead, the Gremio forward established himself as the undisputed crowd favorite. He was the only one of three domestic-based players in the 23-man squad to get a game during the tournament and drew the biggest cheer every time his name was announced or he touched the ball.

In Everton — who at 23 is a rumored target for European giants Manchester City, Manchester United and PSG — Brazil have perhaps found a long-term replacement to the troubled and flawed Neymar as the country's football icon. For some fans, like Elaine Vieira Pessoa de Sousa, Brazil don't need Neymar any more. "We're champions! And the best thing is that it was without Neymar," the 43-year-old told AFP from the streets of Sao Paulo as she celebrated Brazil's victory. "This proves that we don't rely on him any more, it's not all down to him. This is Brazil, no matter who plays." — AFP

Women's football 'forbidden' unless all-female: Aceh

JAKARTA: Less than a week after the women's world cup football final drew record crowds and global TV audiences, clerics in a hardline Islamist Indonesian province said attempts to revive the game in the country were "forbidden" unless men were excluded entirely. "We are not against female soccer at all, however, if the facilities are not ready, female soccer is considered haram (forbidden)," Teungku Faisal Ali, vice-chairman of the Islamic clerical body in Aceh said yesterday.

Aceh, on the northern tip of Indonesia's Sumatra island, is the only province in the world's most populous Muslim nation to officially practice Islamic Sharia law. Considered the 7th Century landing place for Islam on the archipelago, it was granted semi-autonomous status in 2001 after decades of rebellion against the moderate national government.

Indonesian sports authorities are attempting to revive the sport among women in the country by forming a national league, but the Ulema Council in Aceh called on the government to cancel the plan, citing the lack of facilities for female-only matches. The council

said it should only be allowed if the province had a special stadium where only women players, match officials and spectators were present, arguing it would otherwise trigger public anger. "We demand the women's league be postponed so the players will not get a negative response from Aceh people," Teungku said.

Already in Aceh, some 30 enthusiastic women players have participated in a selection trial, and a team is due to be picked shortly to represent the province in the national league. Organizers said the players had complied with sharia regulation including wearing long-sleeved shirts and head-covering hijabs. "They dressed properly in Muslim attire and they played soccer normally, they did not violate sharia law," committee head Ishak Rizal said. He said some young female players had trained for two years and even participated in regional competitions where they had won a trophy.

Organizers were still trying to convince the clerics and the public that female soccer does not breach Islamic sharia law, Rizal said. "However, we will accept whatever is decided by the local government. We will comply if they follow the ulemas' recommendation," he said. Aceh is the only region in Indonesia with Islamic law and where public flogging is a common punishment for a range of offences, including selling alcohol, adultery, and gay sex.

Last month the ulema council issued a fatwa against a hugely popular but brutal online game PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) over fears it incited real-world violence. Indonesia, with a popula-



BANDA ACEH: A woman takes part in rock-climbing at a sports centre in Banda Aceh. — AFP

tion of around 270 million people, is football mad and the top professional men's league attracts sell-out crowds of men and women. On Sunday the United States beat the Netherlands 2-0 in France to win their fourth consecutive women's cup final. In the US alone, more people watched the match on TV than watched the 2018 men's world cup final. — AFP

PSG get tough with Neymar

PARIS: French club Paris Saint-Germain said they would take "appropriate action" after Neymar failed to show up for pre-season training with the French champions. Neymar, the world's most expensive player after moving to PSG for 222 million euros (\$252 million) two years ago, had watched his country win the Copa America in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday night.

But when PSG players including France World Cup-winning striker Kylian Mbappe reported back for training and pre-season medical checks in the French capital on Monday, Neymar was nowhere to be seen. PSG said in a statement: "On Monday 8 July Neymar da Silva Santos Junior was due to return to pre-season activities with the Paris Saint-Germain senior squad. "Paris Saint-Germain notes that Neymar Jr was not in attendance at the agreed time and place. This was without the club's prior authorization. "The club regrets this situation and will therefore take appropriate action."

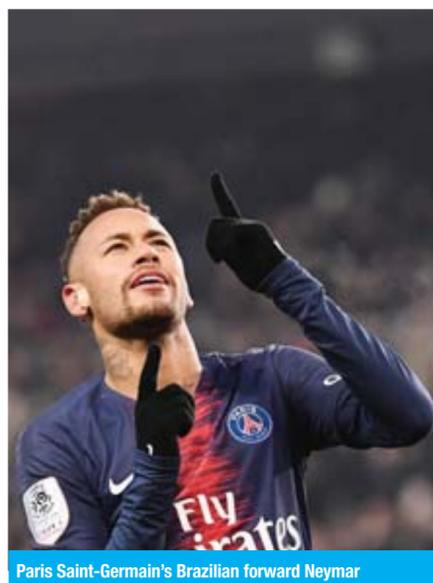
Brazilian media quoted Neymar's father as saying that PSG "were aware" the striker would be unable to return to the club for another week. "The reason was known and planned for a year as part of his activities for the Neymar Institute (charity foundation)," said Neymar Senior. He added: "We couldn't postpone them and he will return (to PSG) on July 15. "It's as simple as that, no drama. PSG are aware and take part in the Institute's activities." Neymar, 27, is undergoing treatment on the torn ankle ligaments that ruled him out of the Copa America.

'PSG won't sell'

His absence is likely to fuel rumors that he could make a surprise move back to Barcelona, the club he left to join PSG, this summer. Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu downplayed that speculation on Tuesday ahead of the unveiling of new signing Frenkie de Jong at Camp Nou.

Bartomeu said Paris Saint-Germain president Nasser Al-Khelaifi was not prepared to sell Neymar this summer, so a deal was unlikely to happen. "We know that he wants to leave Paris Saint-Germain but we know that they don't want him to leave, so there is no case," he said. "I know what I have read in the press. We have contact with Nasser in meetings and committees but he has not told us himself. What we know about Neymar we know from the press."

French media noted that what was striking about Neymar's latest refusal to toe the line was PSG's lack of tolerance of his behavior. After the club said it would take action, PSG's newly installed Brazilian sporting director Leonardo told Le Parisien newspaper that "Neymar can leave PSG if there is an offer that suits everybody." Sports daily L'Equipe's head-



Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar

line was: "With Leo (Leonardo), there's no longer any joking around."

Despite the denials, Spanish sports newspaper Diario Sport reported that intermediaries for the two clubs have negotiated a five-year contract with Neymar accepting a cut in salary from around 36 million euros a year at PSG to the 24 million euros he received at Barca in 2017. In four years in Catalonia, Neymar won the Champions League in 2015 and two La Liga titles, forming a brilliant attacking trio with Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez.

Any return would likely require Barca to raise funds through sales. De Jong has already signed for 75 million euros from Ajax. Griezmann is expected to join from Atletico Madrid for 120 million euros, although that deal has hit snags. Neymar's time at PSG has been punctuated by injury and controversy. He was questioned by Brazilian police last month over allegations he raped a woman he met through social media in a Paris hotel. He has denied the accusations and his father says it was a blackmail attempt.

Neymar will miss three Champions League matches next season as punishment for insulting a referee following PSG's Champions League collapse against Manchester United. Al-Khelaifi has warned Neymar and his other highly-paid stars that they must shape up or ship out, claiming "celebrity behaviour" will not be tolerated. "The players will have to assume their responsibilities even more than before," Al-Khelaifi told France Football last month. — AFP

Manchester City, Chelsea to host women's games

LONDON: Manchester City and Chelsea will play their opening matches of the new Women's Super League (WSL) season at the Etihad Stadium and Stamford Bridge respectively as the Football Association (FA) seeks to build on the interest sparked by the women's World Cup. City's derby meeting with Manchester United on September 7 and Chelsea's clash with Tottenham the following day will both be staged at the Premier League grounds with the men's top-flight on an international break. The matches will be the first in the WSL for Manchester United and Tottenham who were both promoted from the Championship last season.

England's World Cup semi-final defeat to eventual champions the United States was watched on television by 11.7 million people, a record for a women's match in the United Kingdom. "Following an exciting summer of women's football and the Lionesses' impressive form in France, we wanted to kick off the new season with a bang," said City's head of women's football Gavin Makel. "Having the Manchester derby as our home opener was the perfect opportunity to play a game at the Etihad Stadium and welcome our seven Manchester City Lionesses home."

Fans can claim up to four free tickets for the London derby between Chelsea and Tottenham, while City are offering up to three free tickets for under-16s per paying adult, with adult tickets priced at £7 (\$9). City reportedly decided against making the game completely free of charge as they want fans to view the WSL as a product worth paying for. Average attendances in the WSL last season were below 1,000. It will be only the second time City's women's team have played at the Etihad, with the first coming during their successful Women's League Cup run in 2014.

England manager Phil Neville has previously called on Premier League clubs to open their grounds to women's games after the success of hosting matches in big stadia across Europe. Over 60,000 spectators saw England international Toni Duggan score in Barcelona's 2-0 win over Atletico Madrid in March to set a new world record for a women's club match. "The big teams in England have got to open their big stadiums and fill it," Neville told AFP before the World Cup. "Let's blow the rest of Europe away because I think our game in this country is in a far better place than in Spain, Italy or Portugal." — AFP