

Iranian women attend first soccer match in 40 years

TEHRAN: Iranian women entered the country's national stadium in Tehran yesterday after being able to purchase tickets for a national team game for the first time in 40 years.

Women have been banned from watching men's games since shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution with only a few exceptions made for small groups on rare occasions.

But under pressure from world governing body FIFA and women's rights campaigners, Iranian authorities earmarked around 3,000 tickets for them to yesterday's World Cup Asian qualifier against Cambodia in the 78,000 capacity Azadi Stadium.

The tickets are for a special women's only section of the stadium, a decision that has been criticised by some campaigners who would prefer women to be able to attend with their male family members.

Footage posted on social media showed women arriving at the stadium more than two hours before the scheduled kick-off time.

The women waved flags and blew 'vuvuzela' horns while the rest of the stadium was still mostly empty.

But while campaigners have welcomed the access granted for yesterday's game, it is unclear if such scenes will become the norm in Iran.

A report posted by the semi-official Fars news agency warned that women attending yes-

terday's match could be exposed to foul language, drug use and even violence.

"Now that the government has decided to let women into Azadi stadium ... we must be hopeful that the spectators will try to respect Iranian women in order to change the public atmosphere of the stadium," the report said.

FIFA stepped up pressure on Iran to meet commitments allowing women to attend World Cup qualifiers following the death last month of Sahar Khodayari, who set herself on fire to protest against her arrest for trying to get into a match. Dubbed "Blue Girl" online for her favourite team Esteghlal's colours, Khodayari had feared being jailed for six months by the Islamic Revolutionary Court for trying to enter a stadium dressed as a man.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino has urged Iranian authorities to open up stadiums to women for all games, not just World Cup qualifiers. The sport's governing body has sent officials to Tehran to monitor access for women at the match and said it will continue to press for their inclusion.

"FIFA's stance on the access of women to the stadiums in Iran has been firm and clear: women have to be allowed into football stadiums in Iran. For all football matches," it said in a statement.

"Further details on the next steps to be implemented to ensure the future access of women to



TEHRAN: Iranian women cheer during the World Cup Qatar 2022 Group C qualification football match between Iran and Cambodia at the Azadi stadium in the capital Tehran yesterday. — AFP

the stadiums in Iran will follow once we have performed a thorough assessment of yesterday's match based on the input provided by the FIFA delegation that is present in Tehran." — Reuters

Argentina coach hails 'positives' despite Messi absence in Germany draw

DORTMUND: Lionel Scaloni praised his battling Argentina side, missing Lionel Messi, as they scored second-half goals to earn a 2-2 draw in a friendly against an experimental Germany team Wednesday.

The Germans flew into a 2-0 lead with first-half goals by Serge Gnabry and Kai Havertz in Dortmund before Lucas Alario turned the game when he came on for Argentina with an hour gone. The Leverkusen striker pulled a goal back, then set up Lucas Ocampos for a deserved late equaliser.

"We matured during the game," said Argentina coach Scaloni. "We made two or three mistakes in the first half, but got a grip in the second half, were more patient and we take a lot of positives for the future. "I was impressed with the attitude, we didn't give up when we went 2-0 down." Germany head coach Joachim Loew admitted his side faded after a bright start. "We wanted to be in the game right from the off, but unfortunately we couldn't hold on for 90 minutes," said Loew.

"We lost a few balls, a bit of courage and got into trouble." Loew handed out four debuts in Dortmund. Freiburg defender Robin Koch and striker Luca Waldschmidt started, then Leverkusen forward Nadiem Amiri and Schalke midfielder Suat Serdar came on for second-half debuts.

Loew was forced into a hastily re-arranged defence as Koch replaced centre-back Niklas Stark, who pulled out before kick-off with a stomach bug. Despite 13 withdrawals due to either illness or injury, Germany impressed early against an Argentina team missing Messi, Sergio Aguero and Angel di Maria.

With Messi suspended for comments made at the Copa America, Juventus' Paulo Dybala partnered Lautaro Martinez up front



DORTMUND: Argentina's midfielder Lucas Ocampos, Germany's defender Lukas Klostermann and Argentina's midfielder Leandro Paredes (L-R) vie for the ball during the friendly football match Germany v Argentina at the Signal-Iduna Park in Dortmund, western Germany. — AFP

for Argentina. The friendly was a repeat of the 2014 World Cup final, yet Argentina's Manchester United defender Marcos Rojo was the only survivor when the Germans won in Rio de Janeiro. Rojo partnered Manchester City veteran Nicolas Otamendi in an Argentina defence which crumbled early on.

A week after scoring four goals for Bayern Munich at Tottenham, Gnabry put Germany ahead on 15 minutes. The winger used his pace when Atletico Madrid's Angel Correa lost possession to get in behind the defence to stab the ball past Argentina goalkeeper Augustin Marchesin.

When Rojo then lost the ball to Waldschmidt, Gnabry turned provider, using his pace to present Havertz with a simple tap-in on 22 minutes. It should have been 3-0 when Brandt just failed to connect with a Niklas Sule header as Germany looked like they would run away with it.

However, the South Americans had the best of the second-half, starting when Scaloni put Alario on for Dybala on 62 minutes. Alario showed his strength in the air to head past Barcelona goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen four minutes later. — AFP

Euro 2020 hopefuls England must tighten up at the back: Trent

LONDON: Trent Alexander-Arnold says England must improve their defensive record if they are to stand any chance of winning Euro 2020. Gareth Southgate's side can assure themselves of a place in next year's finals if they beat the Czech Republic in their Group A qualifier in Prague today. England are firm favourites to advance after a perfect start to the qualification campaign, including a 5-0 win over their next opponents at Wembley in March. England have a wealth of attacking options including Harry Kane, Raheem Sterling and Jadon Sancho but have had defensive problems in recent matches.

A 5-3 win over Kosovo at Southampton last month did little to paper over cracks that showed when the Netherlands won 3-1 in the Nations League semi-final in June. Individual errors accounted for many of the goals shipped across those two games as Southgate continues to strive for a settled back four. "If we want to be regarded as one of the best teams in Europe and go far in the Euros, and try and win the competition, our clean sheets and goals conceded must be fewer," Liverpool full-back Alexander-Arnold said.

"We have to concede fewer goals. As defenders, as a team and as a unit we know where to improve and where to work on. "Some games, it just happens. We will analyse what went wrong and try and make sure it does not happen again." Champions League-winning right-back Alexander-Arnold will battle with Kieran Trippier for a place in Southgate's team. James Maddison has withdrawn from the England squad for the two Euro 2020 qualifiers due to illness. The Leicester midfielder, 22, has made an impressive start to the Premier League campaign and was in strong contention to make a senior debut. — AFP