

## Sports

# Rampant Morocco score five after Guinea-Bissau hit by medical drama

**JOHANNESBURG:** Morocco rose to the top of their African World Cup qualifying group on Wednesday with a 5-0 thrashing of Guinea-Bissau, many of whose players became ill after eating dinner on the eve of the match. Achraf Hakimi and debutant Imran Louza in the first half and Ilias Chair, Ayoub El Kaabi and Munir El Haddadi netted for the Moroccans, who are chasing a sixth appearance at the global showpiece.

But the convincing Group I win for the Atlas Lions in the top-of-the-table clash was overshadowed by the Guinea-Bissau medical drama, which affected 25 players and technical staff. Guinea-Bissau delegation head Carlos Teixeira had temporarily threatened to boycott the match, saying "I will not send the players to the field - it would be a criminal act on my part".

Head coach Baciro Cande said players and coaches "developed stomach aches about 15 minutes after dinner, followed by diarrhea and vomiting. "Twenty-five were taken to hospital and released just before dawn on Wednesday. As a precaution, we then brought our own food to the hotel." The pre-match drama took some gloss off an impressive performance by Morocco under veteran coach Vahid Halilhodzic.

Morocco have six points, Guinea-Bissau four, Guinea two and Sudan one in a section badly disrupted by a lack of international-standard stadiums and security issues. Guinea-Bissau and Sudan have been forced to stage home fixtures in Morocco due to sub-standard stadia and Guinea are currently barred from hosting qualifiers after a coup last month.

Morocco triumphed despite the absence of several stars, in-

cluding Sevilla forward Youssef En-Nesyri and Chelsea midfielder Hakim Ziyech. Consistent scorer En-Nesyri is injured while Ziyech was dropped because of "unacceptable behavior" during mid-year World Cup warm-up matches. Halilhodzic told reporters that Ziyech had arrived late for friendlies against Ghana and Burkina Faso, displayed a bad attitude, and the medical staff said the midfielder had feigned injury.

Guinea, who had been expected to pose the greatest threat to Morocco, could only draw 1-1 with Sudan in Marrakech. Mohamed Bayo, who scored for Clermont in the French Ligue 1 at the weekend, took his scoring habit to north Africa by nodding Guinea in front off a second-half corner. Saifeldin Bakht equalized 18 minutes from time with a close-range shot to earn Sudan a first point in the group. —AFP

## Harder haunts old club Wolfsburg to rescue Chelsea

**LONDON:** Pernille Harder scored an injury-time equalizer against her former club as Chelsea escaped with a 3-3 draw against Wolfsburg in the opening game of their women's Champions League campaign on Wednesday. The Blues are aiming to go one better than last season when they reached the final for the first time, only to be thrashed 4-0 in Gothenburg by Barcelona.

Chelsea beat Wolfsburg in the quarter-finals last season, but for a long time it looked like the Germans would get their revenge at Kingsmeadow. Sam Kerr had fired the English side into an early lead, but the visitors had turned the game around by half-time as Tabea Wassmuth and Jill Roord struck for the visitors. Wassmuth scored again early in the second period as she pounced on an error from Jessica Carter.

Bethany England started the Chelsea fight-back just three minutes later when she fired home in a goalmouth scramble. But Chelsea looked destined for defeat until Harder, who moved between the clubs for a world record fee in 2020, calmly drilled home with seconds to spare. Elsewhere in Group A, Juventus got off to a flying start with a 3-0 win over Swiss side Servette. Arianna Caruso, Lina Hurtig and Valentina Cernoia were on target for the Italian champions. Real Madrid got their first ever women's Champions League campaign off to a winning start in Group B as Lorena Navarro's goal earned the Spaniards a 1-0 win over Kharkiv in Ukraine. Paris Saint-Germain are the favorites to top that section and were 2-0 winners in Iceland over Breidablik thanks to goals from Lea Khelifi and Grace Geyoro. —AFP

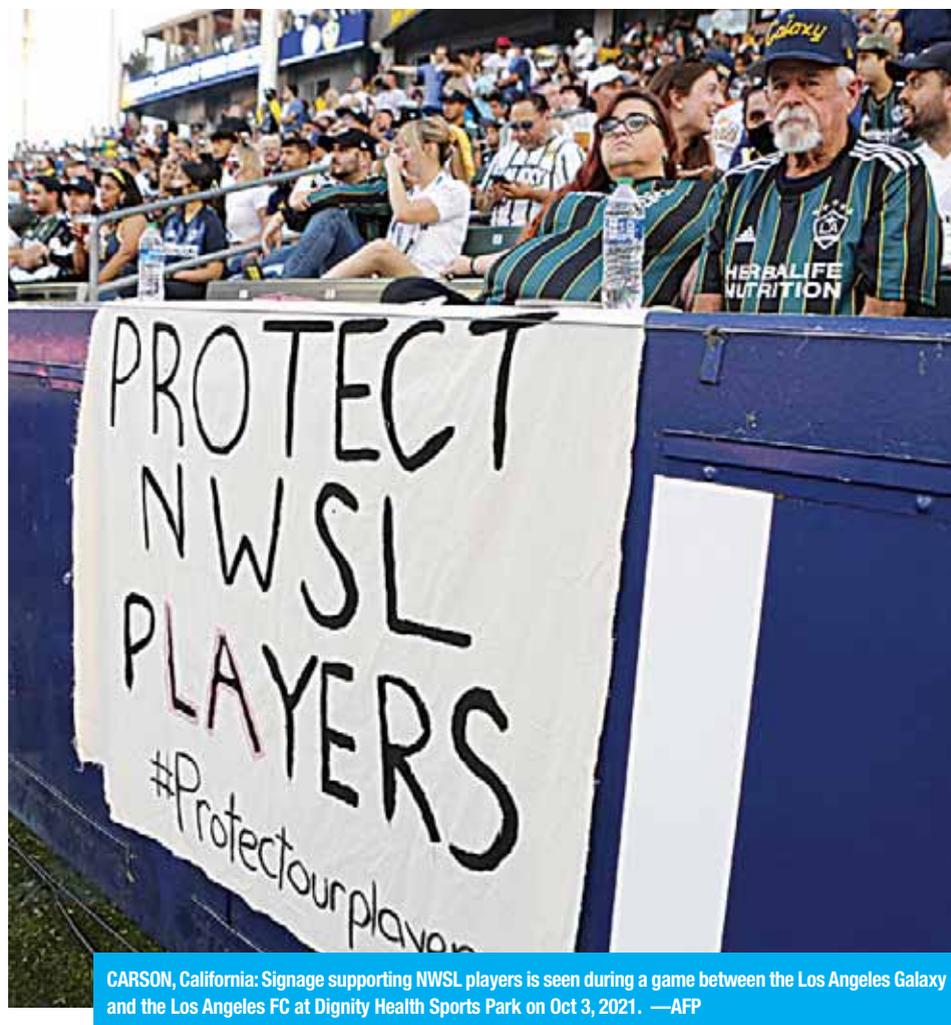
## NWSL players halt play in 'solidarity'

**WASHINGTON:** Players from the Washington Spirit and Gotham FC halted play on Wednesday, leading protests against sexual misconduct scandals that have swept across the National Women's Soccer League in recent weeks. NWSL games resumed on Wednesday with three fixtures after the league called off games last weekend following the latest revelations to hit the top professional women's league in the United States.

Washington and Gotham players halted play in the sixth minute in what was described as a gesture of "solidarity" by the NWSL Players Association, and similar protests followed at the games between the North Carolina Courage and Racing Louisville in Cary, North Carolina, and between the Portland Thorns and Houston Dash.

"Tonight, we reclaim our place on the field, because we will not let our joy be taken from us," the NWSLPA statement read. "But this is not business as usual." Spirit and Gotham players joined arms on the center-circle for the pause in play, which was timed to reflect the number of years it took for allegations against former North Carolina Courage coach Paul Riley to be addressed.

Riley was fired last week for "very serious allegations of misconduct". Two players, Sinead Farrelly and Meleana "Mana" Shim, accused Riley of misconduct during his time as Portland Thorns coach in 2015. "Players will join together in solidarity at the center circle for one minute in honor of the six years it took for Mana, Sinead and all those who fought for too long to be



CARSON, California: Signage supporting NWSL players is seen during a game between the Los Angeles Galaxy and the Los Angeles FC at Dignity Health Sports Park on Oct 3, 2021. —AFP

heard," the statement read.

"We call on fans to stand in silence with us. During that time, we ask you to stand in that pain and discomfort with us, as we consider what we have been asked to sit with for too long." Allegations of sexual harassment and abusive or bullying behavior by coaches and officials in the NWSL have snowballed in recent months.

NWSL commissioner Lisa Baird resigned on Friday following criticism of her

handling of the complaints. The NWSL players association statement detailed a list of demands being made by the union, which included a request for every coach and general manager to submit to the independent investigation into abusive conduct. The players union also called for an investigation announced by the NWSL on Sunday to be expanded in scope to include all 12 NWSL clubs as well as league staff. —AFP