

## Mbappe completes France comeback against Spain to win Nations League



MILAN: French players celebrate with the trophy at the end of the Nations League final football match between Spain and France at San Siro stadium in Milan on Sunday. — AFP

MILAN: Kylian Mbappe fired France to Nations League glory on Sunday after netting the winner which completed a comeback from a goal down to beat Spain 2-1 in Milan. Mbappe struck with 10 minutes remaining to win the title for world champions France after Karim Benzema had levelled just two minutes after Mikel Oyarzabal put Spain into a 64th-minute lead. The win will ease some of the pain created by an early exit from Euro 2020 at the hands of Switzerland and highlighted just how powerful France are going forward.

"I really wanted to win a trophy with France, and now it's done," said Benzema, who returned the France fold ahead of the Euro, to M6. "We showed strength of character, because this team is very strong, never gives up and we have proven it today. It is the sign of a great team not to panic, to be patient and to wait for the right opportunity."

Les Bleus came out on top of a match at the San Siro which came to life after Oyarzabal slid home the opener. As well as the two goals from their superstar

attackers, France had other opportunities to score through Mbappe before a frantic finish in which Spain launched an assault on the French goal. Didier Deschamps can thank Hugo Lloris the match didn't go into extra-time after the France captain pulled off a fine stoppage time save to deny Yeremi Pino a late leveller. Earlier Italy took third place after beating Belgium 2-1 in Turin through goals from Nicolo Barella and Domenico Berardi.

### France ease the pain

France started the strongest and should have been ahead with five minutes on the clock when Benzema was put through perfectly by Paul Pogba. The Real Madrid striker tried to dribble around Spain goalkeeper Unai Simon but went too far

wide and ended up aimlessly hitting a low pass across goal which was easily cut out by Cesar Azpilicueta.

Two minutes later a lightning passing move led to Aymeric Laporte, playing against the country of his birth for the first time since obtaining Spanish nationality, cutting out a low cross. There was little more in the way of goalmouth incident in the opening period as Spain held off France's attacking by keeping a stranglehold on possession — 64 percent in the first half.

A previously niggly contest suddenly got going in the 63rd minute when a sweeping French passing move started by Benjamin Pavard ended with Theo Hernandez smashing a first-time finish against the crossbar. Just

seconds later Spain took the lead through Oyarzabal, who swept home a precision left-foot finish to the delight of the Spanish fans gathered behind that goal. However no sooner had those supporters stopped celebrating than France were level through Benzema, who curled home an outstanding strike after being fed by Mbappe.

Mbappe then had two chances in quick succession to put France head, first chipping way over with Simon off his line in the 68th minute and then hitting a tame shot at the Athletic Bilbao goalkeeper after being set up by Benzema.

The Paris Saint-Germain forward had his goal with 10 minutes remaining though, outfoxing Simon with some deft footwork before slotting home after being set free by Theo Hernandez. Spain responded by going all out for the equalizer, but Lloris first palmed away a Oyarzabal volley in the 90th minute and then got his hand to Pino's strike to ensure the trophy went to Paris. — AFP

“ We showed strength of character ”

## Deschamps hails Benzema's maturity after triumph

MILAN: Didier Deschamps heaped praise on Karim Benzema after the once-exiled forward played a key role in France's Nations League triumph. Benzema scored France's equalizer in a 2-1 win over Spain which handed the world champions the trophy, and Deschamps was delighted with his striker. "Karim is a crucial player and he has proved over two matches that he has very obvious talent, it's there for all to see," Deschamps told reporters. "He has improved in different areas, he's clinical, he plays his part in the build-up."

Real Madrid forward Benzema had been banished from the national team for over five years but was recalled by Deschamps ahead of Euro 2020. He performed impressively in the Nations League Final Four in Italy, pulling a goal back with France two down in their 3-2 win over Belgium on Thursday and levelling the scores on Sunday night with a sumptuous curling shot just after Mikel Oyarzabal had put Spain ahead. "From a personal perspective he's no longer the same person, he's matured. He's been at the highest level for a long while now and I'm delighted he's able to celebrate tonight with France."

### Enrique proud

Luis Enrique said Sunday that he was happy with his Spain side despite them coming up short. Spain went ahead in an exciting clash at the San Siro in Milan through Mikel Oyarzabal's strike midway through the second half but were overhauled by Benzema's goal and Kylian Mbappe's winner 10 minutes from time.



MILAN: France's Kylian Mbappe (left) and Karim Benzema celebrate with the trophy at the end of the Nations League final football match between Spain and France at San Siro stadium in Milan on Sunday. — AFP

The defeat came after a strong performance which could easily have been rewarded by taking the match to extra-time had it not been for some fine saves from Hugo Lloris late on. "I know that we were able to win against European champions and play almost even with the world champions so for players and the team that is all good," Luis Enrique told reporters. "The important thing is that the team maintains its personality and will to win."

Mbappe's decisive strike made the Spain players livid as they were convinced it should have been ruled out for offside but a VAR check ensured that

the goal stood. However Luis Enrique did not want to aim any anger at referee Anthony Taylor, insisting that he wanted to concentrate on his team's positive display. "We don't have the best point of view on pitch as coaches but I think this decision was difficult," he added. "I don't want to say anything about it. I'm used to not talking about referees and concentrate on what I can control. "I've been a coach for 10 years and I've never spoken about referees. I've got nothing to say, I'm concentrating on trying to get my team to play the best way and accepting wins and losses." — AFP

## Denmark bid to wrap up World Cup spot

PARIS: Denmark can qualify for the 2022 World Cup with victory over Austria today, as they remain the only side heading into the next round of European qualifiers not needing other results to go their way to progress.

The Euro 2020 semi-finalists have impressed with seven straight wins, without conceding a goal, to move seven points clear of second-placed Scotland in Group F. Group winners qualify automatically for the tournament, with the runners-up heading into playoffs alongside two sides from the Nations League.

The electric atmosphere at Copenhagen's Parken Stadium played a big part in the Danes' European Championship run, which started with the loss to Finland when Christian Eriksen suffered a shocking collapse mid-match.

The agonizing last-four defeat by England at Wembley could have derailed Kasper Hjulmand's men, but they are the only country in European qualifying still with a 100-percent record. Three more points would ensure the next chapter of the team's journey will be at the World Cup. They will also qualify with a draw if Scotland are held by the Faroe Islands, or if the Scots lose.

Elsewhere, England could move to the brink of qualification in a home clash with Hungary tonight, when their nearest Group I rivals Albania and Poland meet in Tirana. Sweden are looking to move two points clear of Spain at the Group B summit with victory against Greece tonight. Switzerland have a chance to edge level on points with European champions Italy in Group C when they take on Lithuania in Vilnius. — AFP