

Star-studded Morocco squad aim to right wrongs of 1st leg, secure World Cup qualification against Congo



- Vahid Halilhodzic's team was only one of North Africa's Arab quartet not to win final qualification tie 1st leg, but hopes remain Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt will make Qatar 2022 on Tuesday night

RIYADH: Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt last week took major steps toward qualifying for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar with 1-0 wins over Cameroon, Mali, and Senegal.

Missing from the triumphant North African list on Friday was Morocco, who could only draw 1-1 with the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

And while even the winners still have their work cut out to progress on Tuesday night, Morocco have the most difficult of tasks, even though the return match will be taking place in Casablanca.

Things have not been easy for Morocco's national team coach Vahid Halilhodzic, who attracted extra pressure by falling out with Chelsea's Hakim Ziyech and Ajax's Noussair Mazraoui.

When the Bosnian picked a squad of 26 players for the latest round of qualification, there were only three home-based players, from Wydad Casablanca — Yahya Jabrane, Yahya Attia, and goalkeeper Reda Tagnaouti. All started the first leg on the bench.

Instead, Halilhodzic lined up with an all-Europe-based first 11, with three playing in France, two in Spain, two in England, two in Hungary, and one each in Belgium and Italy.

Throughout the game, the Congo attack troubled the Moroccan defense led by Ghanem Saiss and goalkeeper Bono. Having fallen behind after only 12 minutes to a Yoane Wissa goal, Halilhodzic had to take more risks in search of an equalizer, but the approach was often scattered.

The players lacked cohesion on the pitch, and the coach did not inspire any tactical plan on the break until the 76th minute when substitute Tariq Al-Tisoudali managed to square the tie.

Watford full-back Adam Masina, in particular, performed well below par and was subjected to plenty of criticism, while Fiorentina midfielder Sofyan Amrabat, Wolverhampton Wanderers defender Saiss, and Achraf Hakimi of Paris Saint-Germain, alongside the excellent Bono, were among those who emerged with credit.

Although Halilhodzic had been expected to start with an attack of golden duo Ayoub El-Kaabi and Ryan Mmaee, who had scored five and four goals, respectively, in the earlier qualifiers, he instead went with Youssef En-Nesyri ahead of the former.

El-Kaabi did not get on the scoresheet at the recent Africa Cup of Nations but has had a fine season for Turkish club Hatayspor, scoring 15 goals. Many expected him to lead the attack. Mmaee, one of the discoveries of the campaign, kept his place for his recent form for Ferencvaros of Hungary.

Also, by keeping Sofiane Boufal — who had scored two penalties at AFCON — on the subs bench, spot-kick duties went to Mmaee, who missed a penalty that could have changed the complexion of the tie.

En-Nesyri had been one of Morocco's standout players at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, scoring a wonderful goal against Spain, but has recently struggled for his club Seville. At the Africa Cup of Nations, he scored one goal in four matches, but was guilty of many missed opportunities.

Despite that, the coach has kept faith in him, though that did not translate into a decisive contribution in the first leg against Congo.

Now, Halilhodzic and his players have a priceless second chance at home, and fans will hope that whoever he chooses up front will provide the goals that will secure a sixth World Cup participation for Morocco.

Even without Ziyech and Mazraoui, it is a squad packed with European-based stars and elimination now would be a major blow for this generation of players.

But with 50,000 supporters backing them on Tuesday night in Casablanca, qualification to Qatar 2022 is well within reach as will be, for lovers of Arab football, the dream of seeing the North African contingent of Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia join Saudi Arabia and hosts Qatar on the biggest stage of all later this year.
