

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei said his team still has room for improvement despite a comfortable 4-1 victory over Palestine in its opening match at the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar.

A minute of silence was observed before the kickoff as the Iranian players offered sympathy for the loss of over 24,000 people in the Gaza Strip over the past three months, but when the game got underway Qalenoeei's men showed no mercy to their opponents, taking the lead through veteran striker Karim Ansarifard with two minutes into the contest before Shoja Khalilzadeh's sliding effort doubled the advantage inside 12 minutes.

Mahdi Qayedi bagged a third goal for the Asian powerhouse in the 38th minute, finding the net with a composed finish from inside the box.

Tamer Seyam, to the joy of the neutrals at the Education City Stadium, and, of course, consolation of a whole war-ravaged nation, pulled one back for Palestine when he headed home from the edge of the six-yard box after Iranian Saeid Ezzatollahi's header fell into his path.

AS Roma striker Sardar Azmoun, introduced at half-time, restored the three-goal cushion with a close-range effort 10 minutes after the break but the Iranian players took their feet off the gas thereafter, while looked vulnerable at the back at times. "The first game of every tournament is a tricky one and I'm happy with the result, though I'm not pleased with our overall performance today," Qalenoeei said in the post-match press conference.

"Palestine was a decent side and we were lucky to score an early goal, otherwise it could have been much tougher for us as the game wore

AFC Asian Cup: Iran coach Qalenoeei 'not pleased with the performance' despite opening victory



Iranian players celebrate a goal during a 4-1 victory over Palestine in the AFC Asian Cup at the Education City Stadium, Al Rayyan, Qatar, on January 14, 2024.
● ROBERTUS PUDYANTO/AFC

on... We gave away the ball in the opposition half too often, not to mention we were sloppy with the goal conceded. We will have to make sure those mistakes will not happen in the future games. "I'm grateful for the result but I'm expecting an improved display in the next game," added the Iranian, who is in charge of the national team in a second Asian Cup after his previous

spell came to an end with a last-eight shootout defeat against South Korea in the 2007 edition. Chasing a first trophy in the continent's flagship international event since 1976, Iran will next face Hong Kong on Friday. Hong Kong got off to losing start in Group C earlier on Sunday, falling to a 3-1 defeat against the United Arab Emirates.

"The players can celebrate the victory tonight but we'll start focusing on the Hong Kong game right from tomorrow. There is no weak team in this tournament and we have outmost respect for all of our opponents here. We'll have to think of every match like it is the final showdown for us," Qalenoeei said. The Iranian coach believes the depth of his squad could contribute to the team's suc-

cess in Qatar. "We have a very good squad where the quality is about the same. I choose my starting lineup based on the players' performance in training, as well as the opponents and tactics. "You can see how Karim (Ansarifard) and Qayedi [who were given surprise places in the starting XI] performed. Even those who came on did well, so

it's just proof that we don't have a first or second team," added the five-time Iranian top-flight champion as a manager with Sepahan and Esteghlal. Brentford's Saman Qoddous, who is enjoying his best international spell under Qalenoeei, delivered yet another impressive performance in the midfield duo alongside Ezzatollahi, assisting the first two goals for his side

which earned him the man-of-the-match award. "To be honest, I don't know what I think about it (the award)," said Qoddous. "It's a good team performance, and I like that over any individual performance. "I have to thank the coach. I love the position I'm playing right now where I get to be involved more but I will play wherever the coach wants me to play."

Asian Handball Championship: Iran edges China to progress into main round



● IRIHF

Sports Desk

Iran secured a place in the main-round group stage of the Asian Men's Handball Championship after a 24-22 victory over China in Isa Town, Bahrain. Iran got off to a flying start in Sunday's game and took

a 15-10 lead at halftime before holding off China's improved performance in the second period to stand second to South Korea in Group B of the preliminary phase on goal difference. Mohammadreza Oraei topped the scoring chart for Iran with six goals, with

Mojtaba Heidarpour and Afshin Sadeqi bagging five and four goals respectively. Iranian goalkeeper Mohammad Siavoshi, meanwhile, made his contribution with a heroic performance, which saw him take the player-of-the-match prize. Zhou Ao netted a game-high seven goals for China, while Ji Yu had six. This was a second successive victory for Iran in Bahrain following the first-day 40-13 demolishing of New Zealand. The top spot of the group will be at stake when Majid Rahimzadeh's side takes on record nine-time champion South Korea today. The top two of the four groups will progress to the main round – comprising two groups. The four semifinalists will qualify for next year's World Championship in Croatia, Denmark, and Norway.

Barca lacking in every way in Madrid thrashing: Xavi



Barcelona coach Xavi reacts on the touchline during the Spanish Super Cup final against Real Madrid in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on January 14, 2024.
● YASSER BAKHSH/GETTY IMAGES

AFP – Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez criticised his team for their inadequate performance in a humbling 4-1 defeat by Real Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup final on Sunday. The Spanish champions were thrashed in Saudi Arabia by their bitter Clasico rivals and Xavi said his team gave a bad account of

themselves. "We were lacking in every way and have to apologise to the fans, we did not show the level to compete in a final," Xavi told reporters. "It's a heavy defeat, as a Barca fan I'm disappointed, we put on one of our worst displays of the season. "This is not the image that Barca have to show, especially in a final

against Real Madrid." Vinicius Junior hit a first-half treble for Real Madrid, including a brace inside the first 10 minutes, with Robert Lewandowski netting for the Catalans. Rodrygo rounded off Real Madrid's rout in the second half, while Barca defender Ronald Araujo was sent off for two bookings, both for fouls on Vinicius. "We did not stop counter-attacks and runs, we started in the worst way in a final, we were trailing for the whole game," added Xavi. "We reacted well with Robert's goal and then with the penalty, the game basically ended there." Xavi said his team had to work on their mistakes after the defeat, but that three trophies were still at stake this season. Barcelona visit third-tier Unionistas de Salamanca in the Copa del Rey last 16 on Thursday. "It's a trophy lost, we have to be self-critical (but) I still believe in the project and we can still have a great season," said the coach. "I think we can turn the situation around ... everything continues, I've been in these situations many times, there's nothing for it but sucking up the criticism."