

Messi lifts Argentina into World Cup berth

Quito, Ecuador

With Argentina's hopes of qualifying for the World Cup in jeopardy, Lionel Messi scored a hat trick when he was needed most, rallying his country to a 3-1 win over Ecuador and a spot in Russia next summer.

Argentina started the final night of South American qualifying in sixth place, with only the top four qualifying for the World Cup while the fifth goes to an intercontinental playoff against New Zealand.

But the win means Argentina will finish in third, and that books them a place along with Uruguay, Colombia and already-qualified Brazil, while Peru heads to next month's playoff at the expense of Chile, who were eliminated.

Argentina likely needed a win to avoid elimination, but they were behind immediately, as

Ecuador scored in the opening minute.

Defender Javier Mascherano tried to head away a long ball forward, but it fell in the path of Ecuador's Romario Ibarra, who played a headed one-two with Roberto Ordonez at the top of the box before scoring past Sergio Romero.

The goal came just 38 seconds into the game after Willian scored in 35 second for Brazil against Venezuela two years ago.

Argentina were level in the 11th minute as Messi pushed forward and laid the ball off to his left to Angel Di Maria, who returned the pass for the Barcelona star to roll in the equalizer.

Seven minutes later, Messi put his team ahead. Di Maria's pass forward was intercepted, but Messi took it off the defender's boot, ran in on goal and sent a rocket into the top corner.

Messi completed his hat trick with his best of the night in the

62nd minute. After receiving the ball in space about 40 yards from goal, Messi carried the ball to the top of the box, held off a shove from the defender and scooped the ball beyond the keeper's reach and into the net.

Colombia qualified for the World Cup, while Peru reached the playoff after they shared a 1-1 draw. James Rodriguez put Colombia in front in the 56th minute, and at that point, Peru were facing elimination, but Jose Paolo Guerrero stepped up to score a free kick to equalize and push his team into fifth place. (espn)



Argentina's players celebrate



Argentina's Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring