

Messi to start for Argentina in World Cup send-off: Scaloni

Argentina test full-strength lineup after lacklustre win over Mauritania

● **Messi starts against Zambia**

● **Final home game before World Cup defence**

● **Final 26-man squad due end of May**

AFP | Buenos Aires

Lionel Messi was set to start for Argentina in a friendly against Zambia in what is the reigning world champions' final game on home soil before they defend their World Cup crown.

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said Messi, who began on the bench for Friday's lacklustre 2-1 win over Mauritania, will spearhead what is expected to be a full-strength side against Zambia.

"Messi will be in the starting lineup tomorrow," Scaloni said.

Messi, 38, has not formally confirmed he plans to play in the World Cup but played a full part in Argentina's qualification campaign for the finals.

Scaloni indicated that he expects Messi to be part of his



Argentina's forward Lionel Messi controls the ball during a training session in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires province

squad for what would be the eight-time Ballon D'Or winners' sixth World Cup appearance.

"The important thing is that he comes and enjoys being at a World Cup — which, theoretically, will be his last," Scaloni said of Messi.

"We want him to enjoy it, because later on, you really miss

playing in events like these."

Scaloni said Messi yesterday would be surrounded by the established core of the team which topped South American qualifying and that will start the World Cup among the favourites for the title.

"Most of the players we know well will be playing. This will be

the final test," Scaloni said.

"Later, we'll make some changes to take a look at some of the younger guys, but the idea is to field our most familiar lineup," he said, emphasising that Friday's scrappy win over Mauritania was not representative of his squad.

"I am convinced that the



Scaloni hinted Messi's sixth World Cup could be his last, urging the 38-year-old to simply enjoy the tournament rather than focus on the pressure

team's performance level is not what we saw the other day," Scaloni said. "If we see that the team isn't quite there, we'll look for other options. But they deserve a vote of confidence."

Scaloni has already submitted a preliminary 55-player list to the Argentina Football Association, with the final 26-man squad to be confirmed at the end of May.

"I have the list pretty well figured out, but if performance levels aren't up to par, we'll take measures to ensure we bring the absolute best squad possible; we are striving for something as close to perfection as we can get," he said.

"The players who have been with us for a while hold a slight

55

players have been included in Lionel Scaloni's preliminary list submitted to the Argentina Football Association, a group that will be trimmed to just 26 for the final tournament



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LIONEL SCALONI

advantage simply because we know them well; however, they have to maintain that advantage -- and everyone knows what happened the other day (against Mauritania) cannot be repeated."

Australia head to World Cup on a high after crushing Curacao 5-1

AFP | Melbourne

Watford striker Nestory Irankunda bagged a brace as Australia hammered fellow World Cup qualifier Curacao 5-1 yesterday in Melbourne, ensuring they head to North America on a high.

It was the Socceroos final home game before the global showpiece in June-July, building on a 1-0 win against Cameroon last week.

Curacao have now crashed to consecutive defeats after losing 2-0 to China, with new Dutch coach Fred Ruiten facing a formidable task at the Caribbean island nation's maiden World Cup.

"A wonderful send off. We wanted to win this game and go off on a high note, and scoring five is a nice bonus," said Australia coach Tony Popovic.

"We considered a soft goal ... things to work on, but there was a great reaction after that."

Australia are in World Cup Group D with co-hosts the United States, Paraguay and either Kosovo or Turkey. Curacao are in a challenging Group E with Germany, Ivory Coast and Ecuador.

The Socceroos started slowly but got the breakthrough on 23 minutes after a loose pass



Australia's Nestory Irankunda (R) celebrates after scoring

from Curacao captain Leandro Bacuna.

It went to Kai Trewin who via Deni Juric found Awer Mabil with the Spain-based striker chipping over the goalkeeper.

Curacao, the smallest nation ever to make a World Cup, were fortunate to reach half-time only 1-0 behind, but struck back soon after the restart.

Substitute Arjany Martha

slotted the ball through goalkeeper Mat Ryan's legs, only for Australia to respond emphatically.

They collected two goals in four minutes, the first a powerful header by Parma defender Alessandro Circati then a curling shot from dynamic Feyenoord star Jordan Bos.

Irankunda added a fourth with 10 minutes left, doing a

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AUSTRALIA COACH TONY POPOVIC

backflip in celebration, and put another past the goalkeeper soon after as Curacao went to sleep.

Cameroon beat China 2-0 in an earlier match in Melbourne despite having coach David Pagou sent off.

They struck early with Karl Etta Eyong opening their account in the third minute and Saidou Alioum doubling it six minutes later.

There was drama in the second-half when coach David Pagou angrily protested a foul on Mael Fernandez Monyebe.

He was yellow-carded but kept up his rant and was rewarded with a red.

Newcastle say no manager change 'at the moment'



Newcastle manager Eddie Howe reacts during a match (file photo)

AFP | London

Newcastle chief executive David Hopkinson said yesterday the club have no plans "at the moment" to replace Eddie Howe as manager. The Magpies were knocked out of the Champions League after a 7-2 loss at Barcelona earlier this month, before a home defeat by rivals Sunderland left them 12th in the Premier League.

"Eddie's our manager," said Hopkinson, speaking as Newcastle released their latest financial figures, of the 48-year-old.

"I expect to have a great run to the end of the season here

and we'll talk about the future when it's time."

Hopkinson, asked to specify his comments, added: "We are not looking to make a change at the moment. We are not having those conversations."

"We are still in the midst of the season. Right now, we are focused on the seven matches we have remaining and not distracting ourselves with speculation about what we may or may not do in the summer."

Newcastle will return to Premier League action after the international break seven points adrift of fifth place, which will likely be enough for Champions League qualification.