

# WORLD

## features

# Argentina fans still dreaming of glory

*The realisation that the 3-0 thumping by Croatia had left the mighty two-time winners on the verge of a humiliating exit, left some of their fans in tears*



Argentina's fans stand past a flag depicting Argentina's forward Lionel Messi

AFP | Nizhny Novgorod, Russia

**I**t was the morning after the night before for Argentinian fans in Nizhny Novgorod yesterday and the recriminations from the devastating Croatia defeat just hours earlier were well underway.

The realisation that the 3-0 thumping by Croatia -- complete with comedy first goal -- had left the mighty two-time winners on the verge of a humiliating exit, left some of their fans in tears.

On Friday, many remained stunned by what had happened.

"We can't sleep, we can't talk, we can't do anything," said Sebastian, a 34-year-old lawyer who had travelled to Russia from Rosario.

"We've never seen anything like last night."

The team, he said, had shown no "huevos", using the Spanish slang for testicles.

Susi, a grandmother from Buenos Aires who spent an eye-watering \$40,000 taking her son and grandson to Russia, said the result was so bad it could have implications for Argentina's president, Mauricio Macri, as he battles economic problems at home.

"If Argentina loses, it can become a social problem," she said.

The defeat was arguably the most shocking result of the tournament so far.

A team thought among the favourites for the World Cup, with superstar Lionel Messi as captain, were not expected to struggle through the first stage. They certainly weren't expected to play so badly.

The result was Argentina's worst at a World Cup since being dismantled by Johan Cruyff's "Total Football" Dutch side 4-0 on a thundery night in West Germany back in 1974.

Nor were Argentina meant to rely on the results of Iceland or Nigeria just to remain in Russia.

With one point from two games, their fans were desperate for Nigeria to beat Iceland in Friday's game to retain hope of qualifying for the knockout stage.

"Today, all my country is Nigerian," joked Nicolas, 41, a



**Argentina national team reached top of the FIFA World Rankings for the first time in March 2007**

company owner from Buenos Aires. Fans of the "Albiceleste" could be spotted all around Nizhny yesterday.

Some were walking round town in kit, others with "Lio" shaved into their hair, and those draped in the country's flag, like Santiago, a student from the south of Argentina, as he prepared to head to Saint Petersburg for Argentina's crucial final Group D match on June 26.

Who was to blame? The embattled coach Jorge Sampaoli or the curiously listless players who have failed to produce, including the great Messi?

"I believe that the coach is not sure what he wants, or he is unable to pass this onto the players," said Santiago.

"But they also have to play, after all they are professionals."

### Down, but not out

Despair though had turned to hope in the cold light of day, or at least the first signs that all was not lost.

Cousins Juan and Valentino from Cordoba were about to embark on a 20-hour journey by train and plane via Moscow, Rome, Madrid and Buenos Aires to go home.

Their Russian odyssey was over but maybe not their team's. Valentino complained that the Argentinian public and media put too much pressure on the side.

"The people think that the only way is to win the World Cup, they don't consider it a probability to lose," said Valentino, a 19-year-old student.

## Iceland and Nigeria fans soak up history in Russia's Volgograd

AFP | Volgograd

**I**celand and Nigeria fans soaked up the "awe-inspiring" history of Volgograd yesterday as they explored the WorldCup city that was annihilated during World War II.

Nazi Germany's advance into Russia began exactly 77 years ago, on June 22, 1941, and was halted in the city, then known as Stalingrad, in February 1943.

The Battle of Stalingrad is among the bloodiest in history.

It raged for almost six months and when it was over the city was in ruins and around two million Nazi and Soviet soldiers and civilians had lost their lives.

"It's real history," Iceland fan Heidar Gudjonsson said as he

walked up the 200 steps to the "Mamayev Kurgan" monument to the battle -- a giant sculpture

of a woman with sword raised.

"It's shocking and this monument is something else, it's extremely dramatic. It's awe-inspiring and it really has an influence on you," added Gudjonsson.

The memorial complex to the battle is set on a hill overlooking the new 45,500-seat Volgograd Arena and includes the towering 85-metre statue known as "The Motherland Calls", and a hall where an eternal flame to the city's fallen burns. "The World War II history here is one of the most important parts of the 20th century in Europe so it was definitely a factor in our coming here," he added.

"We extended our stay here for two nights when we realised it was Stalingrad," said another Iceland fan, Finnur Einarsson,



**'The Mother of Calls' statue measures 52 meters high and the sword in the hand of the statue measures about 33 meters**



Supporters of the Nigerian national football team pose with Russian fans while visiting the Mamayev Kurgan World War Two memorial complex in Volgograd yesterday

describing the lure of the city's historical sites. "It's overwhelming that five, six times the population of our country died in this one city in just six months. You just can't really fathom how much that is. "The plan was to come yesterday and just be here game day. But we got excited because we will probably never see Volgograd again, so having enough time to see the museum and the sights and everything was definitely worth it."

Nigeria's supporters were also climbing the 200 steps to the Stalingrad memorial complex in the heat and were similarly overwhelmed by the sense of history.

"We heard this was the place that the Second World War happened," said one fan named Suleman.