

rescued Thai team unable to attend final

The youth soccer team rescued from a cave in Thailand will be unable to accept FIFA's invitation to attend the World Cup final. The last four of the boys and the team's 25-year-old coach were rescued Tuesday from a flooded cave in northern Thailand, ending an ordeal that lasted more than two weeks. "We have been informed by the Football Association of Thailand that due to medical reasons, the boys will not be in a position to travel to Moscow for the FIFA World Cup final," the sport's governing body said Tuesday after the rescue operation was completed.

Eight more boys had been rescued in the previous two days after becoming trapped by rising water levels. "FIFA's priority remains the health of everyone involved in the operation," the governing body said. FIFA leaders will meet with Thai soccer officials in Moscow on the sidelines of the World Cup final on Sunday. "We will look into finding a new opportunity to invite the boys to a FIFA event to share with them a moment of communion and celebration," FIFA said in a statement. (AP)



'We're hoping that it's going to be a snowball effect'

Hoops-mad Philippines finally catch case of WC fever

MANILA, July 10. (AFP): Shirts are selling briskly, crowds pack sports bars to watch matches and football is front-page news. Whisper it quietly, but basketball-crazy Philippines has finally been afflicted by World Cup fever. For decades, the nation of more than 100 million was on a very short list of global locations that had failed to fall for the beautiful game. That is beginning to change as football's narrow, but passionate, Filipino following grows fuelled by success of the national team whose new coach is former England great Terry Butcher — a World Cup semi-finalist with the Three Lions in 1990. "Definitely, we do have ... World Cup fever," television sportscaster

Bob Guerrero told AFP outside a Manila bar where he was watching France knock Argentina out of the global tournament. "We're hoping that it's going to be a snowball effect and football will really start to grow here in the Philippines," said Guerrero, who works for top TV network ABS-CBN who are airing World Cup matches live. Grow it may, but at the moment there are only an estimated 1.5 million football-playing Filipinos compared to figures claiming that some 40 million regularly flock to the basketball courts that populate every barangay (borough) across the archipelago. It's a love affair that goes back to the 1900s when basketball was introduced to the archipelago by the Ameri-

cans. Rather than reject the pastime of their colonial masters, Filipinos made it their own. It became part of the curriculum in schools and since then Philippine squads have played respectably on an international level. Basketball's governing body FIBA has them ranked 30th out of 159 nations, just behind China. But, until recently Philippine love and prowess in hoops was missing from their football team, a gap evident even in the nicknames of the respective squads. The Philippines basketball team are dubbed the "Gilas", the local word for elegance, while the football team are called the "Azkals" which is a slang term for stray dogs. "When I arrived, the football com-

munity was very small," said Azkals captain Phil Younghusband, who made his debut in 2009. "You can probably count in the hundreds the people who were aware of football and playing football." The former youth player with English Premier League club Chelsea is one of a wave of photogenic foreign-based players of part-Filipino parentage recruited by the Azkals. In a few short years they have vaulted the team to qualification for the Asian Cup for the first time, and in May they hit their highest ever FIFA ranking of 111th in the world. That success comes on the heels of the launching last year of the country's first pro-league, the Philippines Football League, which added to the mo-

mentum. Experts say the Azkals' steady rise, which has given fans hope of international success, has been key to the game's growth spurt of popularity in recent years. "We're small (people). Let's face it we can't be world champions in basketball," said Edwin Gastanes, general secretary of the Philippines Football Federation. "Our physique, our skill, moves and agility are really very good for football. That's why we have a chance there," he added. The Azkals have never qualified for the World Cup, but Butcher last month made that his goal for the side after they make their Asian Cup debut in the UAE in January.

"There is a hype now," said Francis Castilla from sport marketing firm MMC Sportz. "Everybody wants to jump in on the (Azkals') achievement. It's the bandwagon. The problem will be how to sustain it." Other similarly less football-minded nations have seen their love for the game grow via increased television coverage, which marketers say stimulates attendance at stadiums. It was key in bringing cricket-mad India into the football fold, yet air time is still scarce for the game in the Philippines. Basketball and boxing dominate. The next steps for Philippine football will be strongly influenced by the nation's youth — and there are more and more enthralled by the beautiful game.

Move could cost Italian champs \$120 mln

Ronaldo ends nine-yr Madrid reign, joins Juve

MADRID, July 10. (AFP): Real Madrid on Tuesday announced the transfer of modern great Cristiano Ronaldo to Italian champions Juventus, with the Portuguese superstar saying the time had come "for a new stage" in his life. Spanish media reports said the move could cost Juventus 105 million euros (\$120 million), with Ronaldo signing a four-year contract worth 30 million euros per season. The 33-year-old is expected to have a medical in Turin next week before being unveiled by his new side. "Today Real Madrid want to give thanks to a player who has demonstrated he is the best in the world and who marked one of the most brilliant periods in the history of our club and world football," Real Madrid said in a statement. In a letter posted on the Real website, the five-time Ballon d'Or winner said his time in the Spanish capital, during which he became their record goalscorer, had been one of the happiest in his life. "I only have feelings of huge thanks for this club, for the fans and for this city," he said. "But I think the time has come to open a new stage in my life and that's why I asked the club to accept to transfer me. "I ask everyone, and especially our supporters, to please understand me." Juventus begin their pre-season

schedule with a friendly against Bayern Munich on July 25 in Philadelphia, while Ronaldo could make his competitive debut for the club the following month, with Serie A to announce its fixtures for the upcoming season on July 20. Ronaldo, whose World Cup campaign with Portugal was ended in the last 16 by Uruguay just under two weeks ago, hinted after May's Cham-

ions League final victory over Liverpool that he was considering leaving the Santiago Bernabeu. "It was very nice to be in Madrid," he said at the time, using the past tense. He later played down the comment, but doubts over his future at Madrid lingered, especially after he had also threatened to leave the previous year. Despite failing to score in the 3-1 win in Kiev which sealed Real's third

successive European Cup, Ronaldo finished as the Champions League leading scorer for the sixth consecutive time with 15 goals. Now Juventus will be hoping that he can maintain his ruthlessness in front of goal for a few more years and finally help them end an agonising wait to become European champions for the first time since 1996, despite a prolonged period of domestic success. Massimiliano Allegri's side claimed a seventh straight Serie A title last season by holding off an inspired Napoli, but fell to Real in Europe after a dramatic quarter-final, when Ronaldo ended a thrilling fightback by the Old Lady with a controversial last-gasp penalty. Ronaldo also scored twice in the 2016 final as Real downed Juve 4-1 in Cardiff. It will be the biggest fee ever paid for a player aged over 30, but the Italians are gambling on the hope that Ronaldo can produce similar longevity to their former goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, 40, who left for Paris Saint-Germain last week. But they are not the only ones with faith in one of the best players of all time, with Juventus' shares on the stock exchange spiking by almost 40 percent since rumours of Ronaldo's arrival first surfaced on June 28, and by 5.7 percent on Tuesday alone.

What now for Neymar after World Cup flop?

MOSCOW, July 10. (RTRS): As the World Cup nears its conclusion, Brazilian forward Neymar is faced with not just a bitter few days of what might have been, but a coming season of what to do now. The Paris St Germain striker arrived in Russia hoping to guide Brazil to their sixth title and also as favourite to succeed thirty-somethings Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as the best player in the world. Instead, he was ridiculed for his haircuts, diving and tears, and the 26-year old must now decide what to do about his tattered reputation. He can respond on the field by playing well and winning matches, something that is second nature to a man who won league titles in Brazil, Spain and France, and lifted the Champions League with Barcelona and the Copa Libertadores with Santos. But restoring his reputation off the field is more difficult. "In terms of communications, Neymar's big problem — and it's one common to other athletes — is his lack of empathy," Diogo Kotscho, a communications specialist who looked after Kaka's career and is

now VP of Communications at MLS club Orlando City, told Reuters. "He is very protected, and the people who speak for him are his dad, his mum, his sister, his girlfriend. Neymar never speaks and when he does it is via social media or in tightly controlled interview situations. Any identification with him is superficial. The priority is getting him to open up and let the public know the real Neymar." To many football fans, as well as to the coaches and players who criticised him, the Neymar they saw in Russia was spoilt and narcissistic. One particular incident against Serbia, when he rolled along the touchline in overwrought hysteria, became an instant source of ridicule. Memes picturing the fakery were shared millions of times, as were videos of children imitating his exaggerated response in parks and stadiums as far apart as Mexico and Scotland. Neymar is an obsessive user of social media, and with 99 million followers on Instagram and 61 million likes on Facebook he has considerable influence. People who know him invariably say he is polite and easy going.



In this May 26, 2018 file photo, Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates with the trophy after winning the Champions League Final soccer match between Real Madrid and Liverpool at the Olimpiyskiy Stadium in Kiev, Ukraine. (AP)

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