

Tuesday, 26 March 2013

Iraq beats Syria 2-1 in 1st home match since 2011



Tens of thousands of Iraqi football fans packed a stadium in eastern Baghdad on Tuesday to watch the country's first international match at home for 18 months, a 2-1 victory over Syria in a friendly.

Waving Iraqi flags and chanting "Oh Iraq, you are still alive", boisterous supporters cheered on their team amid tight security. Fans were searched before entering the stadium, while two military helicopters buzzed overhead. Shrugging off the effects of a recent 2-1 loss to China in an Asian Cup qualifier, Iraq's most famous player, Younis Mahmoud, opened the scoring in the 52nd minute. Syria, which is unable to play matches at home due to the civil war, leveled in the 81st through Omar Halaby, only for Ali Rihaima to score Iraq's winner in injury time. Among the Iraq fans was Mahdi al-Karkhi, a 58-year-old Baghdad resident accompanied by his eight children - with the whole family waving Iraqi flags. "I can't express myself today," Al-Karkhi said. "I'm more than happy for Iraq today. I'm thrilled to see the national team playing at home. I hope the ban will be lifted completely not only on the friendlies." FIFA ruled last week that Iraq could host international friendlies for the first time since September 2011 after an effective ban due to security concerns. However, world football's governing body did not specify when the country could stage competitive matches. Iraq has a World Cup qualifier scheduled at home on June 11. Tariq Ahmed, general secretary of the Iraqi Football Federation, described Tuesday's game as "a big football party that has brought back the life to Iraqi football, and has brought back Iraqi fans to the stadium." Ahmed said the stadium was filled to capacity with 45,000 to 50,000 fans, while 20,000 others gathered outside. "Today is only the first stage that will hopefully take us to other stages to lift the ban totally on the Iraqi football," he added. The country sank into chaos after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, but has made significant gains in security after years of insurgent attacks and sectarian violence. Despite the large decrease in violence in recent years, insurgents are still able to hunt down government officials and launch lethal attacks nationwide. Hours after the match started, at least six people were killed and 11 others wounded in shootings and blasts in and outside Baghdad, officials said. Iraq has played World Cup 'home' matches in neutral Doha, Qatar, since a stadium power failure at Irbil when it played Jordan 18 months ago. Baghdad last hosted an Iraq match in September 2009, and the team has played friendlies in the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Iraq has qualified once for the World Cup, losing all three matches in 1986 to host Mexico, Belgium and Paraguay.