

Italians question nationhood after football defeat

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The 2010 World Cup will deliver a changing of the guard at the top of world football after holders Italy joined 2006 runners-up France in crashing out of the competition in its opening phase.

The ageing Italian side on Thursday succumbed 3-2 to unsung Slovakia at Johannesburg's Ellis Park stadium, leaving them to exit the tournament, like France, without a single victory.

The match sprang to life in the last quarter of an hour when Italy, trailing to two goals by Robert Vittek, the Slovakian striker, and desperate to avoid an ignominious defeat finally found their shooting boots.

First Antonio Di Natale halved the deficit before substitute Antonio Quagliarella thought he had equalised only for his effort to be disallowed erroneously for offside.

Slovakia restored their two-goal advantage seemingly decisively in the 89th minute, through a deft lob by Kamil Kopunek who had entered the action from the bench only moments previously.

However, coach Marcello Lippi's men, bereft of ideas and out of touch for most of the match, were still not finished.

In stoppage time, Quagliarella notched a second Italian goal with an exquisite chip. And there was still time for midfielder Simone Pepe to fluff a wonderful chance at the far post before English referee Howard Webb brought the match to an end and triggered wild Slovakian celebrations.

The defeat was made even more bitter by the reaction of leaders of a hardline party in the coalition government of Silvio Berlusconi, prime minister, who poured scorn on the team's shambolic performance

Even as the Italian team struggled to draw against both Paraguay and lowly New Zealand in their opening matches, leaders of the Milan-based anti-immigration Northern League – who have in the past campaigned for an independent "Padania" in northern Italy – had made clear they would not be supporting the national team.

Roberto Calderoli, a minister in the central government, rubbed salt into the wounds after Italy's defeat, declaring: "What a disgrace. Simply ridiculous. Paid millions but with legs of jelly and short of breath."

"This premature elimination is nothing other than the result of a demented sports policy," he said, blaming Italy's poor performance on the influx of "deluxe immigrants" who he said left no space for Italian youth in the top divisions so that even Milan's Inter, which won the Champions League, succeeded with a team completely made up of foreigners.

"To come back to Italy the team does not deserve a business-class flight. If there were a trans-African train they should come back with that," said Piergiorgio Stiffoni, a Northern League senator, comparing Marcello Lippi, the Italian manager, to France's Raymond Domenech – "lots of arrogance and nothing more".

For most Italians disappointment and anger was aimed at Lippi, who, almost in tears at the post-match press conference, announced his resignation, saying he took full responsibility.

"Lippi relied too much on Juventus," said Chiara, a bar owner, reflecting the mood of many Romans that the Azzurri was overly Turin-heavy and should have brought in more diversity and younger players.

It was symptomatic of the sport's problems that not a single member of the Internazionale team, who recently won the European Champions League, was included in the Italian World Cup squad. Instead, many of them are representing Argentina and Brazil.

"It is a second Caporetto," exclaimed one man, referring to the rout of the Italian army in 1917 by combined Austro-Hungarian and German forces.

Historic references abounded in the bars of Rome as Italians questioned whether they really were a nation, a debate that has gripped the media and revealed deep divisions within Mr Berlusconi's coalition as the country marks the 150th anniversary of its unification with the landing in Sicily of Garibaldi's small army.

"You Brits are a nation. We are not. So no one will cry," said Silvano, watching the match in The Albert, an English pub in Rome. But outside people were crying.

Mr Berlusconi, a billionaire media baron who also owns the Milan football club, had no immediate comment.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, June 24th 2010, Europe, online.