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Target for squad is to regain respect

Vijesh Rai

CONCERN has been expressed by no less than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and this goes to show how important it is for the national soccer team to perform well in the Asian Games.

Coach Allan Harris named his 20-strong squad yesterday and as manager Datuk Seri Dr Ibrahim Saad said it, the players are the best Malaysia has at this moment and they have to prove their worth in Busan.

As expected, senior team skipper Ahmad Shahrul Azhar was one of the three over-aged players Harris chose for the under-23 competition. Striker Khalid Jamlus and keeper Azmin Azram Aziz are the others who got the nod.

Harris also included under-23 skipper Hairuddin Omar, whose place was in doubt following an injury, but the Englishman wants the best available players and the team can certainly do with the combative Hairuddin.

"Ahmad Shahrul has done well for the team in the past and I will again depend on him to lead the boys," said Harris.

That Khalid, whose German stint was cut short by injury, was also included was no surprise either.

"Khalid has proven himself to be among the best strikers in the country at this moment. Azmin continues to impress me in the goalkeeping department. I am also glad that Hairuddin is back at his best."

The four, along with striker Akmal Rizal Rakhli, are the core of the team and they will have to be at their best as Malaysia are in a tough Group A with Oman, Maldives and hosts South Korea.

And respect is what the team will be out to regain in the Asian Games, especially as soccer's prolonged mediocrity has everybody, including the Prime Minister, worried.

Ibrahim asked the players to be committed to their cause so as to improve public confidence in the team.

"They must believe in themselves. Currently, they are the best 20 players in the country and they must try to live up to that expectation in Busan, especially since football is the focus of the nation at this moment," said Ibrahim, who is also a FA of Malaysia vice president yesterday.

Dr Mahathir had, when presenting the Budget on Friday, commented on how Malaysian soccer, which at one time tamed Korea and Japan, was now in a rut.

Ibrahim said Malaysia should learn from the Korean team which qualified for the World Cup semifinals.

"The players must not be cowed by their opponents' reputation. The most important thing is that the players must continue to believe in their ability and strive to give the best in all the matches," said Ibrahim.

Malaysia open their campaign against Oman on Sept 27. They play Oman on Sept 30 and Korea on Oct 3.

THE SQUAD - Goalkeepers: Azmin Azram Aziz, Syamsuri Mustafa; defenders: Redzuan Radzy, Khaironissam Sahabuddin, Nizam Jamil, Norhafiz Zamani Misbah, Syaiful Sabtu, Irwan Fadzli Idrus; Midfielders: Juzaili Samion, Ahmad Shahrul Azhar, Indra Putra Mahayuddin, Subri Sulong, Shukor Adan, Fadzli Shaari, Hairuddin Omar; Forwards: Akmal Rizal Rakhli, Khalid Jamlus, Rushanizam Idrus, Eddy Helmi Manan, Zainizam Marjan.