

“We’re Filipinos”: Women soccer players decry criticisms

By Jim Gomez
The Associated Press

MANILA, The Philippines — Members of the Philippines women’s soccer team, which recently qualified for its first World Cup, have played down social media comments that most of the players with mixed American ancestry “were not Filipino enough.”

The Philippines beat Taiwan 4-3 in a penalty shootout in February after the match ended 1-1 in the Women’s Asian Cup hosted by India, a regional tournament that also served as Asia’s qualification for next year’s Women’s World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

The landmark victory added to soccer’s phenomenally growing attention in the basketball- and boxing-crazy former American colony, where young Filipinos often transform busy public roads into makeshift basketball courts and mimic Filipino and U.S. celebrity players.

Boxing legend Manny Pacquiao, who retired from the sport last year after 26 years, has used his stardom as a springboard to national politics. An incumbent senator, he is currently campaigning for



the May 9 presidential elections.

After the victory in India, the still-ecstatic Filipina players and their Australian coach, Alen Stajcic, faced journalists in Manila to reflect on the historic win. An online video of the winning kick posted on Twitter went viral with 168,000 views, 5,700 likes, and more than a thousand retweets.

Then the questions turned to the online criticism, which cast a cloud on the American heritage of many of the players on the Philippine team.

“We’re all Filipino, there’s no such thing as we’re not Filipino enough,” online news site Philstar.com quoted U.S.-based Kiara Fontanilla as telling a news conference in Manila. “I think people that are saying

FILIPINA FIRST. Jessica Miclat (#9) of the Philippines and Lee Geum-min of South Korea jump for the ball during an AFC Women’s Asian Cup 2022 match held last month in Pune, India. The Philippines’ women soccer team made local history by securing their country’s first-ever World Cup spot by defeating Taiwan 4-3 in a penalty shootout after the match ended 1-1. (AP Photo/Rajanish Kakade)

that are wrong. We’re here to make a difference.”

Olivia McDaniel, whose penalty shootout kick against Taiwan gave the Filipinos their first World Cup berth, said the questions hurt her and stressed the Filipino-American players were certain of their identity as Filipinos.

“Some people haven’t been really accepting ... but I think when you’re Filipino, you’re Filipino,” McDaniel said.

Stajcic said the criticisms upset him, having witnessed the hard work, passion, and sacrifices of the players.

“How can you doubt?” he asked. “How can you doubt how much Filipino they are?”

The Philippines women’s team plans to compete in the Southeast Asian Games, the AFF Women’s Championship, and the Asian Games as part of its 18-month preparation for the World Cup.

Japan emperor turns 62, calls for hope to overcome pandemic

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan’s Emperor Naruhito, marking his 62nd birthday last month, called on people to keep “the fire of hope” burning in their hearts and support each other to overcome the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Naruhito said his heart aches thinking about people who have lost their jobs, struggled financially, or felt isolated due to the pandemic.

“The difficult situation has persisted, but I strongly believe that it is possible that we can overcome this severe reality with patience by caring for each other, sharing each other’s pain, and by making

efforts to support each other,” Naruhito said at a palace news conference held ahead of his birthday.

His birthday greetings to the public at the palace were cancelled for a third year, and a palace ceremony was also scaled down because of the pandemic.

Naruhito said his daughter, Princess Aiko, who studies Japanese literature at Gakushuin University, has been taking classes online due to the coronavirus. Recalling his time in college, where he constantly had “new discoveries and experiences” such as meeting people in classes and sharing a table at a cafeteria with other students, Naruhito said he hopes his daughter also can enjoy a post-pandemic campus life.

Aiko is the only child of Naruhito and

Empress Masako, a Harvard-educated former diplomat who has suffered from what has been described as a stress-related condition for about 20 years.

Aiko turned 20 in December and now can help with royal duties as an adult member of the imperial family.

Aiko is not eligible to succeed her father. Under Japanese law, she also has to leave her family if she marries a commoner, like her older cousin, Mako, who married her college sweetheart and moved to New York

with him.

The 1947 Imperial House Law, which largely preserves pre-World War II family values, only allows a male succession line and requires that female royal family members who marry commoners join their husband-led households.

A government panel in December recommended that the government continue the male-only imperial succession system despite a shrinking number of men in the royal family.

Hong Kong vaccinating 3-year-olds amid omicron surge

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong says it is offering COVID-19 vaccines to children as young as 3 years old as infections rage through the semi-autonomous Chinese city. The announcement came in mid-February ahead of another surge in cases. Hong Kong schools also extended a suspension of in-class teaching through March 6.

The wave blamed on the omicron variant already prompted new restrictions limiting in-person gatherings to no more than two households. Hong Kong residents rushed to grocery stores to stock up on vegetables and to hair salons to get haircuts.

Authorities imposed lockdowns on residential buildings wherever clusters of infections were identified, and had already banned public dining after 6:00pm. Only vaccinated people are permitted in

shopping malls and supermarkets, while places of worship, hair salons, and other businesses were ordered to close.

Immunizations using Chinese maker Sinovac’s vaccine for children age 3 and older started last month. Previously, the age limit was 5 years old. Hong Kong has fully vaccinated approximately 73% of its eligible population, not including children.

Hong Kong adopted mainland China’s “zero tolerance” approach to dealing with the pandemic that requires quarantines, mask mandates, case tracing, and lockdowns of buildings, neighborhoods, and entire cities, even when only a few cases are detected.

Beijing officials and Chinese state media say adopting a “living with the virus” policy as some countries have done would overwhelm Hong Kong’s medical system.



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