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By Orlando González Cruz

Havana, December 5 (RHC)-- The Croatian national soccer team qualified today to the quarterfinals of the FIFA World Cup, hosted by Qatar, after defeating Japan in a penalty shootout (3-1).

The reigning runners-up of the tournament and the Japanese "samurai" put up a worthy fight in their Round of 16 duel. The Croatians managed to take the victory from the penalty spot, after completing regulation time and the two extra time periods with a 1-1 draw.

The goals were scored by Daizen Maeda (43'), who gave the Croatians the lead, and Ivan Perisic (55'), who equalized for the Europeans.

Those present at the Al Janoub Stadium witnessed a hard-fought and evenly match, in which neither side was the underdog: the Croatians living up to their billing as favorites for the game, and the Japanese faithful to the flashy soccer they had shown on Qatari soil.

At the end of the game, the stage was set for the always exciting penalty shootout, where goalkeeper Dominik Livaković was the star, saving three shots from Hajime Moriyasu's disciples.

Croatia now awaits the winner of the match between Brazil and South Korea in the quarterfinals. Meanwhile, Japan goes home with their heads held high after an excellent tournament, in which they aroused the admiration of the followers of the most universal of sports, both from a sporting point of view and for the civic lessons offered by their fans.

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