

Morocco coach Walid Regragui has hailed the battling spirit of his players after they defeated Portugal 1-0 to become the first African national team ever to reach the World Cup semi-final stage.

Youssef En-Nesyri's header late in the first half on Saturday at Al Thumama Stadium sent the Atlas Lions through to a last-four showdown with reigning champions France or England.

"We came up against a really great Portugal team. We're drawing on all we have, we still have guys injured. I told the guys before the match we had to write history for Africa. I'm very, very happy," Regragui told France's TF1.

Regragui, a France-born former Morocco international, had already made history of his own as the first African coach to take a team into the World Cup quarter-finals. Morocco have now defeated three of Europe's strongest teams in Qatar – beating Belgium in the group stage and Spain on penalties in the last 16 – after drawing 0-0 with 2018 runners-up Croatia in their opening match.

"When you watch Rocky, you want to support Rocky Balboa because of his hard work and commitment and I think we're the Rocky Balboa of this World Cup," Regragui told reporters, referencing the lead character in Sylvester Stallone's Rocky series.

"We're becoming the team that everyone loves at this World Cup, because we're showing that even if you don't have as much talent, if you show that desire, heart and belief, you can achieve."

Morocco will take on either holders France or England on Wednesday at Al Bayt Stadium with the chance to become the first nation from outside Europe or South America to reach the final.

"We can dream, why shouldn't we dream about winning the World Cup?" added Regragui, who only took over as coach in August. "It doesn't cost you anything to have dreams. European countries have been used to winning the World Cup." Winger Sofiane Boufal also hopes there is more to come.

"It's crazy. We're living and dreaming, and we don't want to wake up. I have goosebumps," he said.

"Everything we have, we deserve. We work hard. It's not over. There's still the semi-final and, God willing, the final."

Off the field, this Morocco squad is uniting the Arab world, inspiring displays of Arab identity from fans in different countries.

"We are taking it one match at a time. We want to win every game," Morocco's Abdelhamid Sabiri said, who later posted a photo of himself on Instagram with a Palestine flag wrapped around him.

"It is an unbelievable feeling. No one thought we could do it. I said last week that

we wanted to end the curse.”

It is a seminal moment in World Cup history, with an African nation finally advancing to the levels typically only reached by European or South American teams.

Cameroon (1990), Senegal (2002) and Ghana (2010) all reached the quarterfinals but got no further.