

Rape probe It happened in Dyer's room!

Football

AFP, London

Police refused Sunday to discuss claims made by a party organiser that he witnessed what happened on the night a 17-year-old girl said she was gang raped by English footballers in a London hotel.

Nicholas Meikle, who claims to socialise with several famous Premiership players, gave the mass circulation News of the World a detailed testimony of the night of the alleged assault last weekend.

But a spokesman for the Metropolitan Police, which is investigating the girl's allegations, said it was "not prepared to discuss" the claims or comment on whether Meikle was under investigation.

Meikle told the News of the World that he slept with the girl on the night she was allegedly attacked at a top London hotel.

He also said that two other Premiership players and a fourth man also had sex with her -- not eight as had been originally claimed.

But he insisted that they did so with her full consent. "No one got heavy with her, this was normal," he was quoted as saying.

Meikle told the The News of the World that rooms at the top hotel had been booked in the name of England star Kieron Dyer, but he played no part in the events of the night in question, September 26.

Meikle claimed that he and three

other men joined the girl "in various combinations", then the next morning they all had breakfast together.

The alleged victim has reportedly told police she agreed to have sex with one Premiership star, and was then attacked by up to seven others in Room 316 at the Grosvenor House Hotel on Park Lane on September 27.

In a detailed, minute-by-minute account to the News of the World,



NICHOLAS MEIKLE

Meikle claimed he first met the girl in a bar and that he invited her back to the luxury hotel.

He said he had sex with her in his room before another man, one of his friends, came in and had sex with her.

He went on to describe how two Premiership players then entered the room and also had sex with her. But he said that at no time was the

girl raped.

"She didn't say no, she didn't push anyone off," he was quoted as telling the News of the World, in a story that was picked up in rival tabloid Sunday newspapers.

He said that after the sexual activity had finished, he and his friend fell asleep in his bed with the girl and that she did not leave them until 2.30 pm (1330 GMT).

The News of the World claimed



KIERON DYER

that Meikle's statement was backed up by a sworn affidavit from another of the men allegedly involved.

Meikle said the two Premiership players who allegedly had sex with the girl were from two different clubs.

It had been reported that up to eight footballers were allegedly involved and rumours about their identities have flooded the internet

and circulated among fans.

But newspapers have so far been unable to print their names for legal reasons.

Meikle also claimed that he thought the girl was aged "21 or 22" and not 17, and that she was "merry" but not drunk.

He told the News of the World that things only turned sour when the men gathered in the hotel room for breakfast and began discussing the night while the girl was in the bathroom.

"Looking back, I suspect she could hear bits of conversation and thought it was about her and we were laughing at her," he was quoted as saying. "Even so when breakfast arrived she stayed to eat."

On Saturday, in a terse press statement, the Metropolitan Police said a "very useful witness" had come forward to assist detectives investigating the claims, following widely-publicised appeals for information.

But it added that the development could not be described as a significant breakthrough.

Officers are currently interviewing all those who were staying or working in the Grosvenor House Hotel

during the relevant time period, carrying out forensic tests on items taken from the hotel, and examining images from the hotel's closed circuit television system.

Premiership MU hot on Gunners' heels

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool's Premiership title ambitions were dealt a potentially fatal blow on Saturday as Arsenal came from behind to secure a 2-1 victory



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United superstar Ruud van Nistelrooy (top) is sent flying following a tackle from Birmingham City's Matthew Upson at Old Trafford in Manchester on Manchester 4.

atAnfield.

The three points kept the Gunners a point clear of Manchester United at the top of the table and leaves Liverpool nine points adrift of the leaders.

A stunning 25-yard strike from Robert Pires secured Arsenal's win after a Sami Hyypia own goal had cancelled out Harry Kewell's opener

for pulling down Paul Scholes in the box.

Van Nistelrooy smashed home the resulting penalty for his eighth league goal of the season. Scholes added a second with a trademark strike from the edge of the area 12 minutes after the break and Ryan Giggs rounded things off eight minutes from time.

in the top flight of English football since May 1984.

Midfielder Seth Johnson scored both Leeds goals, sweeping home the rebound after Brad Friedel failed to hold a Mark Viduka shot after 11 minutes and then firing in a left foot volley 16 minutes later.

Dino Baggio headed Blackburn back into contention four minutes

from time but Leeds held out for three points which lifted them out of the relegation zone.

Leicester found themselves back in the drop zone after a 2-0 defeat at Fulham.

Portuguese striker Luis Boa Morte struck in either half as Fulham shrugged off Steed Malbranque's first half penalty miss.

Alan Shearer's 250th league goal of his career was enough to give Newcastle their first win of the season at the expense of Southampton.

Newcastle remain in the relegation zone however as Tottenham continued their upturn under caretaker manager David Pleat with an impressive 3-0 win over Everton at White Hart Lane.

Frederic Kanoute's fifth Premiership goal since his summer move from West Ham - a stunning 30-yard volley - set Spurs on their way and the visitors were killed off by goals from Gus Poyet and Robbie Keane in the space of four minutes after the break.

Spurs are now unbeaten in three matches since Glenn Hoddle was sacked last month and Pleat is emerging as a potential candidate to succeed him.

Portsmouth slumped to a third straight defeat as Charlton came from behind to secure a 2-1 win at Fratton Park.

Teddy Sheringham had put the home side ahead in the 34th minute but his effort was cancelled out by Jon Fortune before South African striker Shaun Bartlett grabbed all three points with a bullet header in the final minute.

TOP SIX

English Premier League table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Arsenal	8	6	2	0	16	6	20
Man Utd	8	6	1	1	16	3	19
Chelsea	6	5	1	0	16	6	16
Fulham	7	4	2	1	15	9	14
Birmingham	7	4	2	1	8	5	14
Man City	8	3	3	2	14	9	12

Portillo's signs fresh deal

AFP, Madrid

Up and coming Real Madrid forward Javier Portillo has extended his current deal until 2007, the Spanish giants announced Friday.

Portillo, 21, was trained by the club and made his first team debut last season.

Since then he has often come on as a substitute for Brazilian star Ronaldo but made a great start to his career by scoring a 90th-minute equaliser for Real against Borussia Dortmund in last season's Champions League.

The Spanish under-21 international forward is so valued at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium that he has a 36 million euro release clause in his contract.

Real Madrid did not release details about Portillo's salary but the player himself is keen to prove his worth.

"I hope to get more chances to play. The club is wagering a lot on me and I'm not going to let them down," said Portillo.



PHOTO: AFP

THE HILDEBRAND WALL! Stuttgart custodian Timo Hildebrand acknowledges the applause from the stands after setting a new Bundesliga record during the match against Cologne in Stuttgart on October 4. Hildebrand has gone 825 minutes without conceding a goal, beating Bayern Munich Oliver Khan who clocked 802 minutes.

Bundesliga Hats off to Hildebrand

Football

AFP, Berlin

VfB Stuttgart keeper Timo Hildebrand broke Oliver Kahn's mark of 802 minutes without conceding a goal to create a new German league record on Saturday.

Tabletoppers Stuttgart drew 0-0 with Cologne, enough for the 24-year-old to create a new mark of 825 minutes without letting a goal in, during an otherwise uneventful match.

Bayern Munich moved into second place a point behind Stuttgart with a 4-1 victory over Hertha Berlin with Michael Ballack and Roy Makaay both scoring.

On Sunday, both Bayer Leverkusen, who host Hansa Rostock, and Werder Bremen, who entertain VfL Wolfsburg, have the chance to gain top spot.

The 2001/02 Bundesliga champions Borussia Dortmund had their first away success since last December in winning 1-0 at Eintracht Frankfurt.

Giuseppe Reina found the net in the 10th minute and Matthias Sammer's side are now lurking

behind the leading pack in fifth spot, two points behind Stuttgart.

Stuttgart coach Felix Magath will not have been happy with the point dropped against Cologne however as team formed dipped following their high in beating Manchester United 2-1 in midweek Champions League action.

Stuttgart dominated Cologne but their strikers, particularly the young German international Kevin Kuranyi, proved ineffective in front of goal.

Bayern had no such problems hitting the back of the net.

Makaay got the ball rolling in the 22nd minute. He made no mistake from near the penalty spot after

Hasan Salihamidzic had beaten Michael Hartmann on the right and pulled the ball back from the bi-line.

Ballack hit the second in first half injury time when Hungarian keeper Gabor Kiraly could only parry his initial header and Bayern's number 13 made sure with his second attempt.

Bastian Schweinsteiger hit their third in the 58th minute though Niko Kovac pulled a goal back for Hertha midway through the half.

Then, with two minutes to go, Martin Demichelis sent Salihamidzic clear on the right wing and the Bosnian darted into the penalty area and left Kiraly no chance with a right-foot shot from 10 yards for Bayern's fourth.

Kaiserslautern, coached by former Belgian international Eric Gerets, had a resounding 4-0 victory over sixth-placed VfL Bochum, who were playing with 10 men after Bulgarian international striker Marian Hristov was sent off in the 30th minute for his second yellow card.

In other matches, Hannover 96 lost 2-1 at home to Schalke 04, SC Freiburg beat Bayern's neighbours 1860 Munich 1-0, and SV Hamburg beat Borussia Monchengladbach 2-1.

Primera Liga Depor too hot to handle

Football

AFP, Madrid

Uruguayan striker Walter Pandiani scored in his eighth consecutive game to help Deportivo La Coruna back to the top of the Spanish first division after thrashing Atletico Madrid 5-1 on Saturday.

Pandiani now has six goals to his name in the league, after scoring in every game of this campaign so far, and has also found the net in Deportivo's last two Champions League outings.

The victory took Deportivo back to the top of the Spanish first division with 15 points although they may only last 24 hours in pole position as unbeaten Valencia, who have 13 points, visit Barcelona on Sunday.

"The first half was more or less equal. We had a bit of luck with the second goal from Romero but I think we deserved this result after all the work we put in during the second half," said Deportivo coach Javier Irureta.

By contrast, the loss could consign Atletico to the relegation zone by the end of the weekend, as the three teams below them all

play Sunday.

Atletico coach Gregorio Manzano tried to find some consolation in the showing despite the emphatic defeat.

"The team left its skin on the pitch and never gave up. People are going to look at this result and wonder what happened but I prefer to look at the more positive aspects," said Manzano.

"And not every team we are going to play will be 'Super Depor'. The team are still united. We are working hard to and are going in the right direction."

Fran Gonzalez put Deportivo ahead after just five minutes, the Galicians' club captain finishing off some good work by Victor Sanchez.

Atletico's Argentine defender Matias Lequi levelled the scores six minutes later and the visitors gave Deportivo some nervous moments for a short spell before Deportivo's poise returned midway through the first half.

Enrique Romero put them back in front 10 minutes before the break although Atletico defender Carlos Aguilera was credited with an own goal as Romero's shot took a slight deflection off the former Spanish international.

Deportivo sealed the game within 11 minutes of the second half.

After Juan Carlos Valeron and Romero had romped through the midfield, Sergio Gonzalez let rip from 25 metres with a thunderbolt which gave Atletico goalkeeper Mono Burgos little chance on 50 minutes.

Six minutes later, Pandiani got his memorable goal, taking advantage of a dispirited Atletico defence to fire home Deportivo's fourth goal from the edge of the area.

Next week at Barcelona, Pandiani will try to equal the Deportivo club record of scoring in seven consecutive league games, achieved by the Brazilian striker Bebeto in the 1992-93 season.

Atletico had to play the final 10 minutes a man short after second-half substitute Javi Moreno, who had only been on the pitch 20 minutes, picked up his second yellow card.

Deportivo added to Atletico's embarrassment with a fifth goal two minutes into injury time from winger Lionel Scaloni.

Struggling Real Zaragoza leaptfrogged over Atletico thanks to their 1-1 draw at Villarreal.

Villarreal started promisingly with Victor Fernandez scoring direct from a free kick after just five minutes but newly-promoted Zaragoza equalised through David Villa midway through the

Owen worry

AFP, Liverpool

England striker Michael Owen will discover later Sunday whether or not he will be able to play in the crucial Euro 2004 qualifier away to Turkey next weekend.

Owen picked up a leg injury in Saturday's 2-1 defeat to Arsenal at Anfield and will undergo a scan on Sunday.

Just after the hour mark, Owen fell awkwardly and had to go off with what was later revealed to be a twisted muscle in his shin.

The injury leaves England coach Sven Goran-Eriksson to sweat on his star striker's fitness ahead of the trip to Turkey where a draw on Saturday will guarantee his side a place in the Euro 2004 finals in Portugal next summer.

Although an X-ray showed no fracture, Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier admitted he still doesn't know for how long his star striker will be out of action.

"The good news is that the x-ray is clear but he will need to have a scan on Sunday," said the Frenchman.

"It could be a minor injury or it could be something more serious. At this stage we just don't know."

"If it's just a muscle problem then I think he should be fit again in a few days and so he could be available for England next week. But if it's a ligament problem then he'll be out for a bit longer."

Ligue 1 Giuly drives Monaco clear

AFP, Paris

Ludovic Giuly's two goals were the toast of Monaco on Saturday as they coasted four points clear in the French championship after their 2-1 win at Guingamp.

The result meant pressure was mounting on second-placed Marseille, who host Bastia on Sunday night.

Not only have Monaco extended their lead over Marseille, but Lyon, Nantes and Paris Saint Germain all had victories to creep up behind the Riveracub.

Monaco have 22 points, Marseille 18, Lyon 17 and both Nantes and PSG 16 though Marseille have a game in hand.

Giuly, helped on by Spain international Fernando Morientes, ran towards goal and scored with a superb shot in the 16th minute.

Just 10 minutes later Giuly once more found the target, after good work by Morientes and striker Dado Prso, for his sixth goal this season.

Nicolas Gousse pulled a goal back for Guingamp in the 52nd minute.

In the early game, Nantes beat Rennes 1-0 at home thanks to Algerian Fodil Hadjadj in the 22nd minute, and PSG also won by the same score with Pauleta's 20th minute goal to end Sochaux's 29-match unbeaten record at home.

Lyon's Peguy Luyindula scored a hat-trick in their routing 4-2 thrashing of lowly Ajaccio in Corsica.

Toifilou Maoulida scored both goals in a 2-0 victory for Metz at nine-man Lens.

In other matches, Auxerre won 3-0 against Lille including a Djibril Cisse hat-trick, Toulouse drew 2-2 with Montpellier, and both Le Mans versus Bordeaux and Nice against Strasbourg were goalless draws.

TOP SIX

French league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Monaco	9	7	1	1	18	8	22
Marseille	8	6	0	2	13	4	18
Lyon	9	5	2	2	16	7	17
Nantes	9	5	1	3	9	5	16
PSG	9	5	1	3	11	9	16
Nice	9	4	3	2	10	7	15

Red revolution next?

Football

AFP, London

With takeover fever gripping English football in the wake of Russian tycoon Roman Abramovich's swoop on Chelsea, it is little surprise that predators have begun to eye the biggest prize of them all -- Manchester United.

A series of names have been linked with the reigning Premiership champions, who apart from their success on the pitch have the added allure of being perhaps the best known -- and certainly the richest -- team on the planet.

Late on Wednesday, the publicly-listed club issued a statement to London's stock exchange revealing that US tycoon Malcolm Glazer had doubled his stake in the club to 5.9 percent in less than a week,

sparking rumours of a takeover bid.

Last month, a series of media reports said another US businessman, billionaire Philip Anschutz, was poised to make a 500 million pound (715 million euro, 830 million dollar) offer for the club.

Talk of a foreign takeover of United and other clubs, including Aston Villa, has swirled around the game ever since super-rich oil magnate Abramovich bought Chelsea over the summer.

He has since taken the club back into private ownership, wiped out their heavy debts and bankrolled a 111-million-pound spending spree on players, of a sort never before seen in English football.

Manchester United are considered a particularly attractive prize, especially for any tycoon who might want to acquire money as well as reflected glory from their sporting plaything.

Last week the club announced a

22-percent rise in annual profits, including a very healthy free cash-flow before dividend payments of 35 million pounds.

"We believe it is this inherent cash generation which could make Manchester United attractive to a predator," Merrill Lynch analyst Andrew Burnett wrote in a report about the club's fortunes.

However any potential buyer faces a huge obstacle -- football clubs are not like other businesses.

While United's institutional investors would perhaps sell if the money was right, activists estimate that up to 20 percent of the club is owned by smaller shareholders who own stakes primarily because they are fans.

The group Shareholders United, which represents around 5,000 of these small investors, says it is "opposed to any 100-percent takeover" of the club as this would deny fans a say in its running.