

Gunman shoots down noisy fans

AFP, Hong Kong

Thai police were Thursday hunting for a gunman who shot dead two noisy World Cup fans at point-blank range after they ignored his request to be quiet, a police official said.

The gunman was sitting next to 10 Thai football fans who watched Monday's Italy-Ghana match on TV at a restaurant in the popular seaside resort of Pattaya, 70 kilometres (45 miles) southeast of Bangkok.

The fans went wild when Italy scored a goal against Ghana in the match broadcast in Thailand in the early hours of Tuesday, and an argument broke out when the gunman asked them to be quiet, said the police official.

"The gunman came alone and he could not fight against all the 10 people," Pattaya police Major Somphol Nakhthamphan told AFP. "So he used his gun to kill the victims."

Details remained sketchy about the shooting in the resort town notorious for its red light district and organised crime.

Another police official, Chanapat Navalak, insisted the dispute was chiefly fuelled by alcohol and not football, calling it a case of "just three drunken men fighting against each other."

Police identified the male victims as Chamlong Rongsang, 30, and Somsak Sornkhu, 41, and said the Thai suspect, Somnuk Ratanasaeng, aged in his 30s, left the scene in a black Mercedes.

"We know the suspect and are searching for him," Somphol said, adding that the killer used a handgun.

Chanapat, deputy head of Pattaya police, told AFP that police later found the Mercedes in the town and said Somnuk had previously been arrested for possessing a gun without a licence.

Kanyarat Tiemproh, a chef at the crime scene, the Food and Drink Pub and Restaurant, told a local daily that the victims had kept talking about the Italy-Ghana game "too loudly" even after the match.

"The gunman approached them and asked them to be more quiet but the victims got angry and they started having a row," she was quoted by the Thai-language Daily News as saying.

"Then I heard several gunshots before the gunman ran to his Mercedes-Benz and drove away quickly," the chef said.

Thailand does not compete in the World Cup but is passionate about football and gambling. People are expected to wager nearly one billion dollars on the tournament, according to one research centre.

German and Polish fans clash

AFP, Dortmund

More than 300 people were rounded up by police in this German city overnight after German hooligans sparked fighting before the World Cup match between Germany and Poland.

The violence signalled the end of five trouble-free days at the World Cup. Hooligans threw bottles and chairs at police as they tried to move fans out of the centre of the city and riot police then chased several dozen fans through the city.

Police said those detained included 120 hooligans already known to authorities and around 60 Polish fans.

Some of the Poles were carrying potentially dangerous items while others were on a list of known Polish hooligans.

A police spokesman said the fans had played "cat and mouse" with police, but the clashes had only caused slight injuries.

The Germany v Poland match had been identified by organisers as a security risk because of clashes last year between football hooligans from the neighbouring countries.

Hamburg sign Guerrero

AFP, Munich

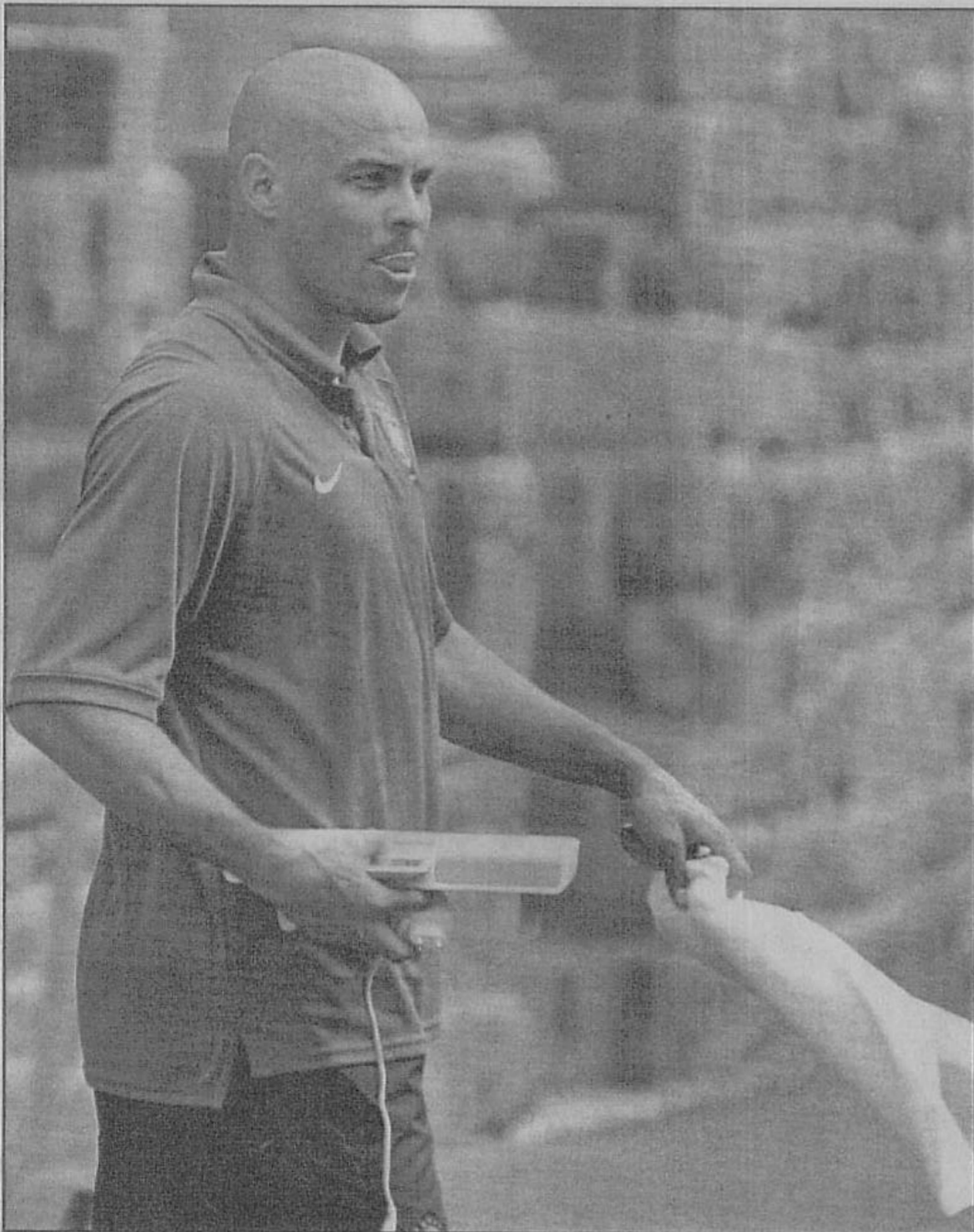
HSV Hamburg have swooped to sign Peru international Paolo Guerrero from Bundesliga rivals Bayern Munich, the German champions announced Wednesday.

The 22-year-old is due to take a medical in the next few days before putting pen to paper, Munich's website announced.

Guerrero arrived at Bayern as a teenager in 2002 from Peruvian club Alianza Lima but spent his first two seasons playing for the reserves and over the next two he played just 27 times for the German double winners, scoring 10 goals.

Guerrero never managed to cement a regular first team place as he was shunted down the striker pecking order by countryman Claudio Pizarro, Netherlands' Robert Makaay and Paraguay's Roque Santa Cruz.

Hamburg and Bayern Munich have already come to agreement over another player earlier this month with Belgium centre-back Daniel van Buyten moving in the opposite direction for 11 million dollars.



Brazilian striker Ronaldo gestures as he leaves the hotel's gymnasium in Konigstein on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Brazil attempt to calm Ronaldo health fears



AFP, Konigstein

Brazil insist that troubled striker Ronaldo, who has been dogged by injury and fitness problems, still has a future at the World Cup despite being taken to hospital complaining of dizzy spells. The 29-year-old was examined in hospital in Frankfurt in a worrying repeat of the drama that hit the player on the eve of the 1998 World Cup final when Ronaldo suffered a fit in the dressing room just before kick-off.

The Frankfurt medical tests showed nothing wrong with him, the Brazil Football Confederation (CBF) said.

The CBF said on its website that the 29-year-old Real Madrid player started feeling unwell on Wednesday evening after the

Brazilians had returned to their plush Konigstein (western Germany) base following the 1-0 win over Croatia in Berlin.

The Brazilian medical team whisked him off to a Frankfurt hospital, but he returned to join the squad after medical tests cleared him and he was expected to train normally on Thursday.

"Ronaldo is fine," said team spokesman Rodrigo Paiva. "He will train normally this afternoon. He feels fine, there is no Ronaldo mystery. This is nothing like 1998."

Ronaldo was the star of the last World Cup in Japan and South Korea, scoring both Brazilian goals in the 2-0 win over Germany in the final.

But his form has slumped over the last year as he has struggled with weight problems and he is expected to leave Madrid during the close season.

He was widely criticised for his lacklustre performance against the Croatians on Tuesday where he was substituted in the second half and

replaced by Real Madrid teammate Robinho.

However, coach Carlos Alberto Parreira has said he intended to play him in the world champions' next game against Australia on Sunday. Australian defender Lucas Neill, who will be one of the players handed the job of marking Ronaldo in Sunday's game in Munich, said the Socceros were not paying much attention to the saga and expected the striker to play.

"He's always dangerous. All the players on their day they can do anything and Ronaldo is no different and we are going to give him the respect he deserves, but not too much," said the Blackburn player.

"I think he's got a bit to prove, in his first game he was criticised, so he'll probably come out and give his best."

Ronaldo needs just one goal to move ahead of Pele as Brazil's top all-time World Cup goalscorer. Both currently have 12 two behind all-time goal leader Gerd Muller of Germany.

Henry puts brave face on poor French start



AFP, Hameln

If Thierry Henry was concerned about his and France's spluttering start to the World Cup the Arsenal legend certainly wasn't showing it as he walked into the lion's den here Wednesday.

Appearing relaxed the consummate showman handled a tough grilling from the French media pack with the dexterity and skill that has made him the Gunners' all-time top scorer.

But it was his and his country's performance under the spotlight in the Rattenfanger Halle 24 hours after the 1998 champions' lacklustre goalless draw against Switzerland.

That stalemate in Stuttgart extended to four the number of games at the World Cup finals in which France have failed to score a sorry sequence they know will have to end against South Korea on Sunday to ensure they avoid a repetition of 2002 and another humiliating first round exit.

Henry's mysterious inability to replicate his free-scoring Premiership form for les Bleus is at the root of the problem, but he for one was unperturbed.

"Ever since I was seven it's been

at the back of my mind when my Dad used to give me aggro if I wasn't scoring, and it's the same when it happens at Arsenal but I won't be losing any sleep over it."

"It's not the end of the world. "Am I afraid of the Korean game? I'm afraid of dying, not about playing a game of football."

"We haven't scored in four games at the finals but you know as well as me how close it can be. Look at yesterday's game - if Frank (Ribery) had passed the ball in front of me rather than behind me that time I would have scored and we'd be having a very different press conference this afternoon."

He added: "Was it a bad start? I don't know. We didn't achieve what we wanted to achieve against Switzerland and now we've got two games but it's not always easy. "Look at Sweden, they were held 0-0 by Trinidad and Tobago."

He rates the looming Koreans highly, suggesting the Dick Advocaat-managed Asians who saw off Togo 2-1 to lead Group G represent an altogether trickier team to crack than Switzerland.

"Korea are talented, they have a lot of technique, they run a lot, they're a team that play without asking themselves questions. "They attack altogether, and defend altogether."

Just beside Henry was a board where French fans had written messages of encouragement to

Raymond Domenech's team.

One read: "A toi marquer 'Titi' Henry" (It's up to you to score...) - you can be sure he will be only too relieved to oblige in Leipzig.

Henry had his own words of encouragement for Ribery whose first full cap thrilled France fans who have taken the young Marseille midfielder to their hearts.

But the player anointed as the new Zinedine Zidane in the main failed to leave such a deep impression on the game as he had done when coming on as 'a joker' in France's three friendlies.

"It wasn't easy for Frank," said Henry.

"It's not easy always to play well on your first match."

Ribery himself, who has enjoyed a rapid rise from France's amateur ranks, reflected: "My performance was positive even if it wasn't easy. There'll be other games where I'll feel more at ease."

Asked how he felt about the 'Riberymania' sweeping France he smiled: "I don't think there is any Riberymania but I'm happy that people rate me highly. "That proves that I'm doing a good job, that I'm someone straightforward, who enjoys being with everyone, whether it's the players or in every day life."

Left foot worry for Messi

AFP, Herzogenaurach

Argentina's teenage star Lionel Messi, who has not played in the World Cup yet, has a painful left foot following training on Wednesday, a team source said.

Team doctors were keeping an eye on Messi but he was not thought to be seriously injured, the source at the squad's base in southern Germany added, two days ahead of Argentina's tie against Serbia-Montenegro in Group C.

"It's from a blow or a strain to the left foot, but it's not a tear," the source told AFP.

Coach Jose Pekerman chose to bolster the team's defensive capability in the 2-1 victory against Ivory Coast last Saturday and did not field the 18-year-old.

Messi, who has recovered from a three month layoff due to a thigh injury, was in scintillating form for Spanish league champions Barcelona this season.

Pekerman has come under intense pressure to include the youngster, who has been hailed as an heir to Diego Maradona, in his starting line-up.

Saudi coach criticises 'weak' Ukraine

AFP, Munich

Saudi Arabia coach Marcos Paqueta boldly criticised Ukraine as "weak" on Wednesday after they were hammered 4-0 by Spain. Paqueta said Ukraine needed to change their tactics after finding themselves bottom of Group H following the first set of matches.

"Ukraine is a weak team, they have to change the way they play because they need to score goals so they can qualify," he said.

Paqueta's Saudi Arabia battled to 2-2 draw with Tunisia on Wednesday, leaving the two Arab teams in joint second place in the group.

Rangers reject Barthez

AFP, Glasgow

Fabien Barthez may be France's number one stopper but he is not good enough for new Rangers manager Paul Le Guen, according to the player's agent.

Barthez, a free agent after quitting Marseille at the end of last season, was offered to countryman Le Guen, the new Gers boss, but was flatly rejected.

Instead, Le Guen is interested in Paris St Germain keeper Lionel Letizi, another compatriot, to replace Ronald Waterreus for the new season.

Former Manchester United goalkeeper Barthez's agent Jean-Marie Cantona, brother of another former United stalwart Eric, said: "I know Paul Le Guen very well from his time in France and had a friendly discussion about the possibility of Fabien going to Rangers."

"I knew Paul wanted to change his goalkeeping position at Rangers but he didn't want to take on Fabien. He has other options and I respect him for that."

Chilavert cleared of jail sentence

AFP, Paris

A French appeals court on Wednesday dismissed a six-month suspended jail sentence against top-scoring goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert, over a false document used in a compensation wrangle with his former club Strasbourg.

The outspoken Paraguayan ex-international was convicted last July after the club took legal action against his claims it reneged on an extra 2.4 million euros (3 million dollars) of a 4.4 million euro (5.5 million dollars) fee he said he was promised.

However, the Paris appeals court on Wednesday ruled that uncertainty surrounded about how the document used to back up the player's claims was made.

The court also quashed the court order requiring Chilavert, now 40, pay 10,000 euros (12,600 dollars) damages to the Strasbourg club plus a symbolic sum of one euro to club president Patrick Proisy.

One of the game's leading free-kick specialists, Chilavert scored 62 goals as a professional player, making him the highest-scoring professional goalkeeper of all time.

Strasbourg recruited the controversial keeper in 2000, but he was sacked after a stormy two seasons in September 2002 for refusing to play a French league match against Lille.

Pirlo fearful of backlash



AFP, Kaiserslautern

Italy midfielder Andrea Pirlo believes the United States' desperate need for three points will make them dangerous opponents in Saturday's Group E World Cup match in Kaiserslautern.

Trounced 3-0 by the Czech Republic in their opening match, the Americans must want to boost their hopes of surviving the first round while victory for the Italians could be enough to earn them a last 16 place.

"We won't be underestimating the United States because they have to win against us or they're out," said Pirlo, who scored the first goal in Italy's 2-0 win over Ghana on Monday which stretched their unbeaten run to 19 matches.

"They were well beaten by the Czechs in their first match, but that will only make them more determined to get the three points."

Italy coach Marcello Lippi admitted he was surprised by the ease with which the Czech Republic beat the Americans.

"I was expecting a closer match because the USA have made giant strides in the last five years," he said. "They reached the quarterfinals of the World Cup four years ago and came here full of confidence."

Defender Gianluca Zambrotta is in line for a recall for Italy after recovering from the left thigh strain which kept him out of the Ghana match.

Tenacious midfielder Gennaro Gattuso, also absent against the Ghanaians, is making good progress after feeling a recurrence of a right leg injury and could play some part.

Landon Donovan and DaMarcus Beasley are expected to retain their places in the United States team, despite being publicly criticised by their coach Bruce Arena.

But Bobby Convey believes his two midfield partners can handle the stick and will be eager to make

amends for their team's poor start. "Landon and Beasley are big enough people. They'll take it and come out fired up," Convey said.

"People are used to it. That's what Bruce does. He criticises players and tries to make them better."

Convey said their loss to the Czechs had triggered a positive reaction from the squad.

"There is some urgency," he said. "Guys who weren't on the field want to be on it. Guys who were want to prove they should stay on it."

"Everyone knows we have to do better. Everyone was excited in training. The coach said he is going to make changes. That gives everyone an opportunity, and when you get an opportunity you have to take advantage of it."

Italy, who won the World Cup in 1934, 1938 and 1982, have played the United States eight times, winning six and drawing two.

Rebel stars man the barricades



AFP, Berlin

There's revolution in the air at the World Cup and France, the Dutch and Serbs are amongst those who have players manning the barricades.

With stress taking its toll, coaches amongst the 32 nations taking part are battling to put down dangerous splits which threaten to derail their campaigns.

And they've only played one match. After France were held to a disappointing 0-0 draw by Switzerland, benched striker David Trezeguet led the plotters, questioning coach Raymond Domenech's tactics.

"When we've got strikers like those in the France team we've got to go for it," the Juventus attacker said.

"We have to push forward, we've got all the attributes to do that. Domenech wants to have a well balanced side, a side which controls the opposition. I agree with that but you also have to remember that there are sides who attack who are well organised as well."

The Netherlands, no strangers to mid-tournament fall-outs, have also been hit by bickering.

Arjen Robben, who scored the only goal in the win over Serbia and Montenegro, came under fire from teammate Robin van Persie who thought the Chelsea winger was too selfish.

"Together we hope to play six matches in the World Cup and that he can't do all by himself," van Persie said.

"He must take into account his teammates. Sometimes he makes decisions for himself and not the team."

Robben stressed there "are no problems between us". "I don't think he meant anything nasty by his comments," said the winger.

Sweden, held to an embarrassing 0-0 draw by Trinidad and Tobago, saw two of their players have a bust-up in the dressing room.

The Swedish press reported that skipper Olof Mellberg and Freddy Ljungberg fell out with the brawl bringing back memories of the 2002 World Cup, when Ljungberg angrily went for Mellberg following a hard sliding tackle during training and the players had to be separated by force.

But this time, it was no more than "a hot but short dispute", the IT news agency quoted team spokesman Thomas Saleteg as saying.

Serbia and Montenegro's dwindling hopes were in tatters after a key player suffered a serious injury,

compounding disputes about nepotism and coaching tactics.

Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic limped out of the tournament with an injured left knee.

The Serbs had arrived in Germany already a player short when OFK Belgrade midfielder Dusan Petkovic, son of coach Ilija, refused to travel amid claims of nepotism.

Serbian captain and striker Savo Milosevic, who was substituted in the 1-0 defeat against the Dutch, was also unhappy when he was hauled off.

"I don't have any comment to make, ask Petkovic," an angry Milosevic said.

Another side heading to the exit look to be the United States who suffered a 3-0 mauling at the hands of the Czechs with coach Bruce Arena singling out midfielder Landon Donovan and midfielder DaMarcus Beasley for criticism.

"I don't know what he wants me to do," Beasley said. "We just have different views."

Add to these, Togo's longrunning rows over bonuses, Cristiano Ronaldo's unhappiness at being taken off in Portugal's opener against Angola and Michael Ballack's unhappiness at missing Germany's win over Costa Rica, the rebels look set to keep yelling over the next three weeks.

Arena vows changes



AFP, Hamburg

USA players went through their most intense World Cup practice Wednesday, the pressure increasing after coach Bruce Arena promised changes following an opening 3-0 loss to the Czech Republic.

"There is some urgency," midfielder Bobby Convey said. "Guys who weren't on the field want to be on it. Guys who were want to prove they should stay on it."

"Everyone knows we have to do better. Everyone was excited in training. Bruce said he is going to make changes. That gives everyone an opportunity and when you get an opportunity you have to take advantage of it."

Four days before a must-win

Group E match-up against Italy, no spot is secure after Arena said midfielder Landon Donovan "showed no aggressiveness" and added "we got nothing" out of midfielder DaMarcus Beasley against the Czechs.

"It's obvious we need to make a couple changes. What they are we don't know," Arena said. Beasley fired back that he adapted to line-up changes made by Arena and will probably not start against Italy if that's how Arena feels.

"If Beasley is any kind of a man and a player he understands," Arena said. "If he doesn't he's not going to be able to help us in games two and three either."

Both Convey and forward Eddie Johnson, who earned praise from the longest-serving coach at the World Cup after his second-half appearance, made their feelings clear on Donovan by saying: "Landon has to be on the field."

"Landon can play a variety of

positions. I'm confident with him anywhere on the field," Johnson said.

Asked about if Donovan was on the bench he replied: "That won't happen."

Arena expects Donovan and Beasley to use the stinging slights as motivation.

"Our whole team is going to get criticized. That's how it is," Convey said. "Landon and Beasley are big enough people. They'll take it and come out fired up."

"People are used to it. That's what he does. He criticizes players and tries to make them better. "You know you're going to get criticized by a coach. As a team it's about how we're going to react. If that's what he thinks he has to do, that's what we will have to do."

Johnson said the Arena-Beasley rift is overblown but also noted: "I'm going to be careful when I answer this."

"There's nothing in it. They have a great relationship," Johnson said. "It didn't surprise me. If Bruce didn't say the things he said, it would mean he didn't care."

"Beasley and Donovan are two of the best players in America, players we count on, players who make a difference. They are going to look at themselves in the mirror and know if they had an impact or not."

"Whatever he said was in the past. I'm pretty sure he's talked to them."

A USA squad praised as deeper and more talented than the 2002 quarterfinal version was unable to regroup after allowing a Czech goal in the fifth minute.

"The game was a wake-up call for us. Guys have to start stepping up," said Johnson. "We always talked about this team has more depth than 2002. Now we need to prove it. We're in a tough situation. We have to create our own luck."

"We have to play a little bit quicker and relax a little bit more, be more confident with the ball," Convey said. "We just have to link up better."



BRUCE ARENA