

Confusion over

FIFA ban on Cameroon

YAOUNDE, Dec 30 (Reuters/Internet): Cameroon's international soccer status was uncertain on Wednesday after national television broadcast the contents of a letter from FIFA suspending the country from competition.

But FIFA said it had made no such decision. "As far as FIFA is concerned, Cameroon is not suspended from football," FIFA spokesman Andreas Herren told Reuters on Wednesday.

"No communication has gone out from the general secretary's office to Cameroon on this matter and, as our offices are closed until January 4, nothing will be decided until then at the earliest."

On Tuesday a statement, reportedly from FIFA, was broadcast on Cameroon television stating that the Federation Camerounaise de Football (FECAFOOT) had been suspended from all FIFA-organised competitions after a decision on December 23.

The statement said FIFA had taken this step because of "frequent interference in the affairs of FECAFOOT by the Ministry of Youth and Sports", which has prevented the federation from implementing directives issued by FIFA and aimed at restoring order in FECAFOOT.

FECAFOOT has been in disarray since its former president, Vincent Onana, was detained over a World Cup tickets sale scandal in June.

He was suspended from his post in August, along with FECAFOOT's national management committee.

FIFA has made no secret of the fact it is upset at government interference in the sport in the country, but matters appeared to be improving after Cameroon's sports minister Joseph Owona met FIFA president Sepp Blatter in November.

2006 World Cup

Seven-nation race

To meet deadline

ZURICH, Dec 30 (Reuters/Internet): Seven countries have entered the race to stage the 2006 World Cup Finals before the deadline for official bids closes on New Year's Eve.

South Africa, who officially entered their bid on December 14, became the seventh and final entrant along with Brazil, England, Egypt, Germany, Ghana and Morocco.

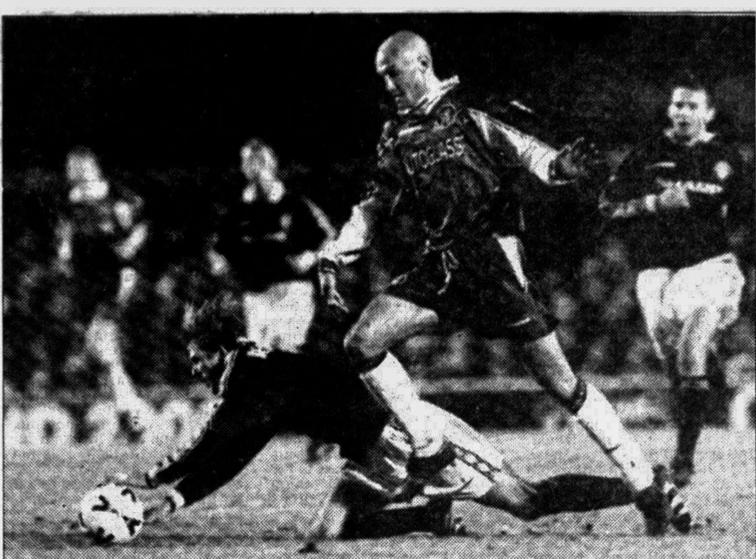
Danny Jordaan, the chief executive of the South African bid confirmed his nation's bid had been sent to FIFA two weeks ago.

Speaking from a beach in Port Elizabeth where he was spending the Christmas and New Year holiday, Jordaan said: "Our documents were registered with FIFA on December 14 and we hope to make a formal presentation to FIFA at the Soccer Expo meeting in Cannes in January."

Morocco, who unsuccessfully bid for the 1994 and 1998 World Cups, added their name to the list earlier this month. The other countries all submitted their official bids in November.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has repeatedly advocated the 2006 finals being staged in Africa for the first time if all the conditions laid down by FIFA for hosting the tournament -- stadium facilities, transportation, telecommunications, security and hotels -- can be met. The first deadline for 2006 competition is Thursday when the official declaration of intents must be lodged with FIFA in Zurich. The deadline for a formal written commitment to bid for the tournament is April 1 next year.

FIFA inspections will be completed by January 31, 2000 with the decision being made by the Executive Committee in March 2000.



CLOSE SHAVE: Chelsea's French international Frank Leboeuf (C) escaped being fouled after committing this foul on Manchester United's David Beckham during their English Premiership clash at Stamford Bridge on December 29. — AP/UNB photo

Chelsea's missed opportunity

LONDON, Dec 30 (Reuters/Internet): Chelsea and Manchester United played out a 0-0 stalemate in the premier league on Tuesday, allowing Aston Villa to move into 1999 in top spot.

In a scrappy match Chelsea, who would have overhauled Villa had they won, enjoyed the better of the first half, capitalising on Manchester United's passing errors in midfield and testing Denmark goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel.

Norway's lanky Chelsea forward Tore Andre Flo went into the break deeply frustrated after putting the ball wide or high from clear scoring positions four times.

Both managers, Chelsea's Italian boss Gianluca Vialli and United's Alex Ferguson, were pleased to have avoided defeat. "I'm a little disappointed after that first half but satisfied with the point," said Vialli.

"Chelsea created a few good chances and we were lucky to survive the first half," said Ferguson, adding: "I think both teams are happy to have settled for a draw."

Flo's sharpest chance went begging after a display of Italian wizardry from Gianfranco Zola, who rounded two defenders and fired from close range. Schmeichel parried at Flo's feet, but the ball ricocheted just wide.

Chelsea's World Cup winning captain Frank Leboeuf and fellow defender Michael Duberry kept Andy Cole and Paul Scholes in check but got a fright halfway through the first period when Andy Cole rounded Chelsea keeper Ed De Goey only to see his shot scrambled off the line. Ten minutes later a rather subdued David Beckham curled in a cross but Scholes's shot went straight to the keeper.

Beckham perked up in the second half and benefited from Scholes's substitution by Teddy Sheringham, who made more space up front. United upped their tempo and tightened their somewhat porous defence with Roy Keane and Gary Neville distributing with greater flair and imagination. De Goey was forced to punch the ball out from Sheringham in the 61st minute and an imposing Duberry scrambled the ball off the line four minutes later. Zola, ever busy, had Chelsea's best chance of the second half but when he found himself face to face with Schmeichel he tried and failed to power the ball through the big Dane's legs.

Schmeichel, who leaves English football at the end of the season, confounded critics who maintain he has lost his touch with an inspired display throughout a match Chelsea will feel they lost through squandered chances.

They can count themselves lucky that they did not finish the game with 10 men after the referee -- showing seasonal goodwill -- failed to produce a second yellow card for Leboeuf for pushing Beckham after he had already gone in the book for a foul on Cole.

The Frenchman himself was waiting for his marching orders. "I think maybe I deserved a red card but it was not intentional," he said after the match. United fans thought they might have snatched the three points in the dying seconds as a Ryan Giggs sally and shot went straight to the tall Dutch Chelsea keeper. De Goey fumbled it and only just managed to stop it bouncing over the line.

The draw put United into third place above Arsenal on goal difference and the top four clubs move into the new year with four points separating them.

In the evening's other Premier League match, Wimbledon fought back twice to hold fifth-placed Leeds to a 2-2 draw.

Udinese after Schmeichel

COPENHAGEN, Dec 30 (Reuters/Internet): Italian Serie A club Udinese are among a number interested in signing Manchester United's Danish goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel when he leaves Old Trafford at the end of his season, his agent Ole Frederiksen said on Wednesday.

Frederiksen said there has also been interest shown from clubs in France, Spain and Portugal.

Schmeichel is allowed to start talking to other clubs from this weekend, but he is unlikely to return to Denmark with Brondby, the club he left in 1991 for United.

"It would be good for my son to learn another language before we return home," Schmeichel said.

PSG's Domi now Magpies

NEWCASTLE, Dec 30: Didier Domi joined Newcastle from Paris Saint Germain on Wednesday and is set to make his Premier League debut Jan 9 against high-flying Chelsea, former club of Magpies manager Ruud Gullit, reports AP.

The 20-year-old defender, who has lost his place on the PSG lineup, signed a 4 1/2-year contract worth 3.25 million pounds (5.4 million dollars). The fee will rise to 4 million (6.7 million dollars) depending on the number of appearances he makes for his new club.

"I'm young but I'm, very happy to be at Newcastle," Domi said on his arrival at St James' Park. "The Premier League is very good and the truth will be shown when I play. It's there that you will see my true worth."

Newcastle manager Ruud Gullit, who is trying to revive the team's fortunes after 18 months of lacklustre performances, said Domi would fit in neatly to the left side of defence.

"He's a very good positional player," he said. "Of course in England that is something we are not used to because in England people want to have players who can tackle and run. But it's also important to have the right position because if you are in the right position, you don't have to tackle."

Zagallo takes over

RIO DE JANEIRO, Dec 30: Mario Zagallo took charge of Sao Paulo club Portuguesa on Tuesday, his first job since coaching Brazil to the World Cup runners-up spot in July, reports Reuters.

Zagallo said he hoped to bring an elusive title to the modest club, which has come agonisingly close to winning a trophy several times in the last four years.

"Portuguesa's time will come and I hope it will be now," said the 67-year-old veteran, sacked by Brazil two weeks after they lost 3-0 to France in the World Cup final.

Portuguesa were Brazilian championship runners-up in 1996, reached the last eight last year and the semifinals this year.

They were also beaten finalists in this year's Paulista (Sao Paulo state) championship.



Brazilian supporters Romario (R) and Edmundo handing over the winner's trophy to a ladies soccer team after an exhibition match in Rio de Janeiro on December 29. — AP/UNB photo

A-Z of the year's soccer

LONDON, Dec 30 (Reuters/Internet): Two Frenchmen named Aime and Zinedine encapsulated the A-Z of soccer in 1998.

Aime Jacquet defied almost endless criticism of his coaching methods and team selection to fashion France into World Cup winners.

Zinedine Zidane emerged as France's ultimate hero as his team beat Brazil 3-0 to win the World Cup final at the Stade de France on July 12. Zidane scored two headers and later had his name emblazoned in lights on the Arc de Triomphe.

The French victory crowned the biggest-ever World Cup of 32 teams and inspired celebrations that had not been seen in the country since the end of World War Two.

Apart from France's success, the World Cup also provided the year's greatest soccer mystery after Ronaldo's lethargic performance in the most one-sided World Cup final of all time.

After apparently suffering a seizure the night before the final, he was taken to hospital and his name left off the team sheet for the game.

But with less than an hour to go before kickoff, Ronaldo arrived at the stadium and after major disagreements between the coaching staff, medical staff and senior players, the striker was named in the starting lineup.

An indication something was wrong came when Brazil failed to show for their pre-match warm-up, and it was clear almost from the first whistle that Ronaldo was completely out of sorts looking slow, sluggish and playing as if in a daze.

Brazil never looked remotely like winning the match and when Emmanuel Petit scored the third and final goal in the last minute, France's victory was complete.

That they achieved it without a potent strike force spoke volumes for both Jacquet and Zidane, who, apart from his suspension following his first round sending-off against Saudi Arabia, was an inspiration on the pitch.

Jacquet's team overcame their lack of firepower, and the temporary loss of Zidane and the defenders and midfielders into attacking positions as often as possible, and as a result, the goals were spread around the

team. Defender Lilian Thuram scored his first international goals in the 2-1 win over Croatia in the semifinal, while centre-back Laurent Blanc scored the golden goal winner in the 1-0 quarter-final victory over Paraguay.

Blanc, one of France's outstanding players, was denied a place in the final after being sent off in the semifinal when Croatian defender Slaven Bilic over-reacted to a touch from Blanc, collapsing and holding his head as if he had been poleaxed.

His later apology was rejected by the Frenchman, but symbolised one of the negative aspects of the tournament which produced a record number of 22 sendings off and 257 cautions.

Not only were players too quick to dive and feign injury, but referees were too inconsistent, gullible and under pressure from FIFA, whose conflicting messages on how to control matches, merely made matters worse.

Although the World Cup did not produce one truly great match, there were some memorable moments and goals.

The goal of the tournament was scored by Denis Bergkamp in the last minute of the Netherlands' quarterfinal against Argentina.

With the score at 1-1 Bergkamp collected a lofted 70-metre pass from Frank de Boer. He controlled the ball with one touch, turned inside the defender with a second and volleyed it home with his third.

Argentina were also the victims of an audacious goal scored against them in the second round by England teenager Michael Owen who ran through the defence to strike home after a run and shot of breathtaking skill.

After 120 minutes of unrelenting drama which saw both teams hold the lead and England reduced to 10 men just after halftime when David Beckham was sent off, the match finished 2-2. Argentina won 4-3 on penalties to secure a famous victory.

While the tournament saw a change in order of at the top with the emergence of France and Croatia and the eclipse of an aging German side and the end of Brazil's reign as world champions, Europe still dominated.

The continent that produced seven of the eight quarter-finalists in 1994 had six in the last eight this time as Africa again failed to mount any sort of challenge.

Egypt, who lifted the African Nations Cup in February, failed to qualify for the World Cup, while runners-up South Africa were out of their depth in France.

Nigeria topped their group but crashed to earth in the second round to leave Africa still off the pace as new FIFA president Sepp Blatter argues its case to host the 2006 World Cup.

Blatter, 62, succeeded Brazilian Joao Havelange, 20 years his senior, who had been president of the world governing body for 24 years.

The Swiss, Havelange's long-time deputy, won a fierce election battle against UEFA's 68-year-old Swedish president Lennart Johansson for the right to take soccer into the new millennium.

While the World Cup provided most of the on-field drama, administrators such as Johansson and Blatter have been battling to steer the ever-expanding global game forward without it being destroyed by a totally unworkable fixture list and sheer greed from the leading clubs and players. It is not yet clear whether they will succeed.

Once the World Cup was over, UEFA, with FIFA's backing, had to battle hard to see off the threat of a rival European Super League to its own Champions League.

UEFA has responded with an expanded Champions League offering tens of millions of dollars in prize money starting next year.

With the 2000 European championships just over the horizon and Blatter keen on the continuation of the largely meaningless Confederations' Cup tournament for confederation winners, soccer is reaching saturation point. It is a worrying trend for the future.

But in this year of profound change, there were two significant successes that at least acknowledged the past.

Real Madrid, who set European soccer alight with their five successive European Cup wins in the 1950s and early 1960s, were crowned European champions for the first time in 32 years when they beat Juventus 1-0 in the final in Amsterdam.

The Daily Star Entertainment Guide

Thursday 31st December (All programmes are in local time unless otherwise stated. We are not responsible for any change in the programme)

BTV 3:00 Opening announcement, Al Quran, Programme summary 3:10 Religion: From 6:30 Ganga 3:15 Patriotic song 3:20 Ujjal Uchhal. 3:40 Cartoon: Kimba the White Lion. 4:00 Khobar 4:25 Open University 5:00 Mabe Ramadan 5:30 TV School Debate 6:00 Dharma-O-Jibon 6:30 Khobar 6:40 Programme from Chittagong Centre 7:05 Aahaban 7:25 Sandha Malati 8:00 News in Bangla 8:30 Antarghat Angane 9:00 Documentary 10:00 News at Ten 10:30 Film show: The X-Files 11:15 Khobar/The News 11:30 Close down.

BBC 6:00 BBC World News Following by Weather 6:30 Living: Holiday Fasten Your Seatbelt (A seasonal edition of the programme in which members of the Holiday team discuss their lives on the road of the travel industry) 7:00 BBC News Today by Weather 7:30 Asia Today (The latest news, analysis and features from the BBC correspondents who live and work in the region) 7:45 World Business Report (The latest business news with informed analysis from the world's financial centres) 8:00 BBC News followed by Weather 8:30 USA Direct (The Law Show from New York) 9:00 World Business Report (The latest business news with informed analysis from the world's financial centres) 9:30 Asia Today (The latest news, analysis and features from the BBC correspondents who live and work in the region) 9:45 World Business Report (The latest business news with informed analysis from the world's financial centres) 10:00 BBC News followed by Weather 10:30 USA Direct (The Law Show from New York) 11:00 World Business 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