

Sport

Boycott threat looms?

DUBAI, July 11: One of the Asian delegates who walked out of Friday's FIFA congress in Los Angeles said today that a 'boyout' of the 2002 World Cup was still on the cards, reports AFP.

Mohammed ben Hammam of Qatar, speaking on his return to Doha from the runaway congress as FIFA president Sepp Blatter had described it, stressed that the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) would carry out its threatened non-show in the next World Cup if an extra fifth berth was not forthcoming.

Ben Hammam, who on Friday resigned from FIFA's technical committee, said: "The AFC will not go back on its decision until the fifth place which has been given to South America is restored to us."

His comments came 24 hours after the Saudi Football Federation (FSF) had proposed staging an extraordinary meeting of the AFC general assembly to iron out the row.

Titles go to Sino shuttlers

BANGKOK, July 11: China's badminton players, battling for places in next year's Sydney Olympics, achieved a clean sweep of the titles in the Thailand Open today, reports Reuters.

The Chinese won the men's and women's singles and doubles at Bangkok's Nimburit stadium, as well as the mixed doubles played on Saturday.

In the men's singles, unseeded Ji Xinpeng's dream run in the championship ended when he lost the final in straight sets to compatriot Chen Gang.

World number nine Chen's well-rounded game proved too much for Ji, who had been the surprise of the tournament. He was beaten 15-12, 15-6.

World number two and top seed Dai Yun of China captured the women's singles title when she defeated second-seeded compatriot Gong Ruina 11-6, 11-5.

In the women's doubles, Qin Yiyuan and Gao Ling saw off vita Marisa and Emma Ernawati of Indonesia 15-8, 15-9 while in the men's Yu Jinhuang and Chen Qiqiu beat Michael Sogaard and Jim Laugesen of Denmark 15-11, 15-13.

The first set of the men's singles final saw a hard fight with Ji twice clawing back into contention to 5-7 and 10-11. But Chen's experience and powerful smash ultimately got the better of Ji.

"I have to gain ranking points and be selected for the Olympics," Chen said. "It was a fast and attacking game today. My experience helped me."

Dai took a 4-0 lead in the first set of the women's final before Gong fought back to 5-4. But Dai regained the initiative with fierce smashes that troubled her opponent throughout the match.

Sydney tickets selling better

SYDNEY, July 11: Local demand for Sydney Olympic tickets had surged as the initial offer entered the final week, a SOCOG official said Sunday, reports AP.

After a slow start SOCOG said interest had picked up as the July 16 deadline got closer. Five million of 9.6 million tickets to next year's Summer Games are available to Australian fans through mail order or Internet.

Those applying for tickets in the first round will go into a lottery for available seats. Tickets for events which are not sold out will then go on sale again with those holding tickets getting the first refusal.

The overseas allocation may also be increased with SOCOG reporting better than expected foreign interest.

The demand from right across Australia is very strong. I think this shows Australians from all over are embracing their games," said SOCOG ticketing spokesman John O'Neill. "We're very comfortable with where we are and we think we're in for a hell of a ride this week. We think we will have a very good result."

"Our call centre received a huge spike in numbers late last week, we've been taking about 500 calls a day — on Friday, we took 1,800 calls."

SOCOG has not revealed how many ticket applications it has received, although it says a free offer for an Olympic pin for the 50,000 received has now finished.

O'Neill said people were ordering a mix of sports across a number of days and said the demand for tickets from overseas was greater than their allocation.

No 1 on the request list is track and field, which will be held in the 11,000-seat main stadium. The opening ceremony, swimming, soccer and field hockey round out the top five.

Yokohama selected

TOKYO, July 11: Japan's organising committee for the 2002 World Cup soccer finals has chosen the nation's largest stadium in Yokohama, south of Tokyo, for the venue for the final match, reports said today, according to AFP.

The decision is expected to be formally approved at a July 26 extraordinary executive board meeting of the Japan Organising Committee for the 2002 FIFA World Cup (JAWOC), the Yomiuri Shimbun and Japan Broadcasting Corporation said.

The 2002 football World Cup, to be co-hosted by South Korea and Japan, will be first finals to be staged in Asia.

The 70,336-seat Yokohama International Stadium is about 25 kilometres (15 miles) away from central Tokyo.



US President Bill Clinton visits the locker room of the national team to congratulate the players after their World Cup triumph on July 10.

Presidential praise!

LOS ANGELES, July 11: President Bill Clinton was among the 90,185 fans at the Rose Bowl here on Saturday to watch the US team win the women's World Cup Saturday, reports AFP.

"The whole country is caught up," said Clinton after the American team defeated China 5-4 on penalties.

"It's going to have a bigger impact than people ever realised, and it will have a far reaching impact not only in the United States but also in other countries," he said.

After the game Clinton visited the Chinese dressing room first before going to the US dressing room to congratulate the winners.

"We were honored to have you in the United States," he said, adding that they played a "magnificent game."

"The first thing he said was congratulations to our team," said disappointed star striker Sun Wen. "Also we had a picture taken with President Clinton."

He then went over to the US team, telling the players, "It was a most exciting game." He thanked them for the gift you have given the United States. We've learned a lot about soccer and a lot about women athletes."

Clinton also visited Michelle Akers, who left the game early with an injured shoulder.

Brown in trouble

LONDON, July 11: Scotland's national soccer coach Craig Brown was accused Sunday of religious bigotry when a British newspaper reported that he sang sectarian songs to a mistress, reports AP.

The tabloid News of the World reported that 59-year-old Brown, who has been Scotland coach since 1993, was recorded singing "hate-filled anti-Catholic" songs on an answer phone message.

The paper alleged that Brown left his message for a lover following an Old Firm match between Glasgow rivals Rangers and Celtic.

But Brown, a former Rangers player, denied the allegations and said the matter was in the hands of his lawyers.

"I have already taken legal advice ... with a view to issuing legal proceedings against the News of the World for defamation," he said in a statement released by his brother Jock Brown, a former Celtic official.

The main thrust of litigation is in respect of the allegations of bigotry, which I completely deny.

"I am not and never have been a bigot, as friends and colleagues of all persuasions will be able to confirm."

The Old Firm rivalry between Rangers and Celtic has polarised soccer supporters in Glasgow along religious lines.

Catholics traditionally support the green and white hoops of Celtic while Protestants follow Rangers, which wears a blue strip.

The allegations against Brown arise as the Scotland Football Association is attempting to stamp out sectarianism following the resignation in May of a Rangers official also accused of singing anti-Catholic songs.

Rangers vice-Chairman Donald Findlay, one of Scotland's leading lawyers, quit Rangers after a newspaper published photographs of him apparently standing on a stage and singing what the paper described as "anti-Celtic anthems" following Rangers' Scottish Cup win over Celtic.

The United States, host of the 1994 World Cup finals, could be among the challengers.

2012 Olympics

Joint-bidders get boost

WASHINGTON, July 11: A bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympics has received a major boost, with donations of more than 1 million dollars in new corporate contributions. The pledges push efforts to raise 10 million dollars by 2002 past the halfway mark, reports AP.

Blatter was outraged by Friday's mass walkout and hinted sanctions might be taken against the national associations that left the Congress.

"FIFA as an institution can't give in to this kind of pressure," he said. "If we do, we will die as

British media reports Saturday said FIFA, soccer's world governing body, would be forced into moving the 2002 event out of Asia if the dispute over Asia's allocation of berths in the finals continues to escalate.

English World Cup 2006 bidders offered to fill in as 2002 hosts when financial and scheduling concerns last year cast doubt over the staging of the World Cup in Asia for the first time.

Those concerns were erased but the walkout by Asian officials at the FIFA congress in Los Angeles on Friday raised new speculation that FIFA president Sepp Blatter will be forced

to take drastic decisions.

Saturday's Daily Mail newspaper reported that England is on standby to take over the 2002 World Cup following a "rebellion of the Asia nations."

Their threat of a boycott of the qualifying competition compels FIFA to make contingency plans in case a solution cannot be found and it becomes unrealistic to take the greatest event in world sport to the Far East," the Daily Mail reported.

The longer the protests continue and the more frequent the walkouts, the greater likelihood that FIFA will run out of patience and seek an alternative venue.

England had their first and only World Cup triumph in 1966, the last time the tournament was held in the British Isles. The last major soccer tournament hosted in England was the Euro '96 finals.

The Asian allocation issue, which first arose in December, appeared solved when UEFA offered half of one of its 15 European places to Asia earlier this week. That meant Asian nations had the prospect of getting five teams, including the two host nations, into the finals.

But the Asian Football Confederation and its members are upset that their demand for a fifth guaranteed place in the finals has not been met and say they will boycott the tournament.

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