

World Cup 2006 Morocco want to be first

CASABLANCA, Aug 13 (Reuters/Internet): Morocco should be the first African country to host the 2006 World Cup finals due to its geographic location, expertise, infrastructure and soccer history, a senior official has said after presenting the country's bid to FIFA.

"Morocco is the African country with the best soccer record," Driss Benhima, head of Morocco's 2006 bid Committee told a news conference on Thursday.

"A FIFA decision in our favour will take the World Cup back to the heart of the football planet and give a concrete expression of a continent," he added.

Morocco lost out to the United States in 1994 and to France in 1998 and is again the outsider alongside South Africa, England, Germany and Brazil.

Benhima's conference was held in the financial centre of Casablanca after his return from Switzerland, where he presented Morocco's official bid document to FIFA chief Joseph Blatter, who has said he would like to see an African World Cup.

The file contains technical and financial details, including a 5.6 billion dirhams (560 million dollars) investment to meet the FIFA soccer requirements.

Progress, both in terms of sport results and organisation of international events such as the GATT conference, African Nations Cup, Mediterranean games and Pan-Arab games has been acknowledged by the FIFA experts," he said.

With its 30 million inhabitants, Morocco is located just 14km from Europe and at the crossroads of Africa and the Arab world, he said.

Morocco's ongoing developments in sectors such as transport, telecommunications and sport infrastructures "should put our country on the top list of competitors for this Cup," Benhima said.

He said it would be an honour to host the tournament and that a Moroccan World Cup would enable football to advance not go backwards.

Romanian soccer doc banned

BUCHAREST, Aug 13: A Romanian club's doctor has been banned for life by the country's soccer federation (FRF) over the death last month of one of the team's players, reports Reuters.

The doctor Victor Popovici, failed to turn up for Astra Ploiesti's match at Rapid Bucharest where Stefan Vrabiuru, 23, collapsed and later died after coming on as a substitute.

Popovici has cited personal reasons for his non-appearance, saying his wife was sick.

Rapid's doctor Marian Dumitru has been banned for five years for not leaving the ground to assist Vrabiuru while he was being driven away. He has said he judged at the time his duty lay more with his own team.

The ambulance Rapid had hired had no doctors on board and Vrabiuru died in the poorly equipped vehicle.

Rapid have been ordered by the FRF to play their next home game at another stadium.

Meanwhile, an investigation is under way to determine the precise cause of Vrabiuru's death and police are conducting a parallel inquiry.

Junio, Pradon in SEA tennis final

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Aug 13: Filipino Bryan Junio beat second seed Danai Udomchoke 6-3, 6-4 Friday, preventing an all-Thai men's singles tennis final at the Southeast Asian Games, reports AP.

For the total medal, No. 4 seed Junio will meet top seed Srichapan Paradon of Thailand, a 6-4, 6-4 winner over Indonesia's Suwandi, seeded third.

Top seed Wynne Prakusya of Indonesia advanced to Saturday's women's final with a 6-3, 6-2 victory over Malaysia's Khoo Chin Bee, the fourth seed. She will meet second seed Maricris Fernandez of the Philippines, a 6-1, 6-3 winner over third seed Orawan Wongkalamalai of Thailand.

IAAF to inquire Barmasai's claim

MONTE CARLO, Aug 13: The International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) said on Thursday it would investigate Bernard Barmasai following his claim that a fellow Kenyan had allowed him to win the 3,000 metres steeplechase at Wednesday's Zurich Grand Prix, reports Reuters.

Barmasai said he had asked Christopher Koskei to let him win and keep him in the hunt for a share of a million dollar jackpot for winning seven out of seven Golden League events.

"When he tried to pass I tried to talk to him. I said leave it for me, and that's why he slowed down," said Barmasai.

"He would have won today, but because he is a friend and we have to live together... the jackpot is for me and my friends.

The IAAF said in a statement: "Following press reports of certain statements made by the Kenyan athlete Bernard Barmasai... the IAAF is to conduct a formal investigation to ensure that the principles of fair play have been fully respected."

PSG look for third in a row

PARIS, Aug 13: Paris St Germain go into Saturday evening's battle with Metz determined to prove that they have put last season's traumatic campaign behind them, reports AFP.

PSG have made a superb start to this season and top the table after two games ahead of Nantes, who are the only other side to have won both opening matches.

And coach Philippe Bergcro, now on a permanent contract after helping the club avoid relegation as caretaker last May, has been further boosted by the arrival of Brazilian defender Cesar.

Last season was an unmitigated disaster for the French capital's only top flight club.

A huge pre-season spending spree, including a French record 11 million pounds deal for Nigerian playmaker Jay-Jay Okocha, raised hopes of a glorious season.

Instead PSG spent most of the time battling against the drop and constant revelations of feuding within the team undermined Alain Giresse and Arthur Jorge, who both came and went as coach.

Most of the troublemakers - notably Italian striker Marco Simone - have moved on and this year's close-season spending spree, on early evidence, seems to be yielding better dividends.

Ali Bernarbia, the playmaker who inspired Bordeaux to the title last season, was the biggest purchase, but another former Montpellier striker Laurent Robert, has grabbed the

early headlines. Robert was rewarded Thursday with his first call-up for France for the World Champions' friendly with Northern Ireland in Belfast next week.

Julio Cesar joins Werder Bremen

COLOGNE, Germany, Aug 13: Just 48 hours before the curtain goes up on the new German first division season Brazilian defender Julio Cesar has made a surprise return to German shores to play for Werder Bremen, reports AFP.

The 36-year-old Cesar played some of his best football between 1994 and 1998 when he was at Borussia Dortmund but constant knee problems and a homesickness for warm Brazil have undermined his reputation since then.

Cesar made a brief reappearance at Dortmund last season but quickly lost interest as the cold European winter set in and switched to Panathinaikos Athens.

"Julio is someone who can help us right away, he's a very good stop gap solution. He can and will fill the vacuum left by our long term injured players Viktor Skripnik and Bernhard Trares," Werder's sports director Klaus Allofs said.

Cesar will be paid on a match by match basis but won't be eligible for this Saturday's Bundesliga opener against VfB Stuttgart. He is expected to arrive in the Hanseatic city in a week's time and, if he passes a physical examination, will sign a contract and be named against Schalke on August 21st.

He is the first player from the French overseas territory of Reunion to win such an accolade.

Nantes, meanwhile, will also try to remain 100 per cent when they host Lens.

Marseille, in third, host newly-promoted St Etienne on Sunday with the "Greens" determined to register their first win back in the top flight.

But their sweeper Jean-Guy Wallemme, formerly of Lens, Coventry City and Sochaux, will miss the trip to the Stade Velodrome.

Marseille, meanwhile, are injury hit with Eduardo Berizzo, Patrick Blondeau, Pierre Issa and Ivan de la Pena all unlikely to play.

Big-spending Lyon welcome Rennes in the other match on Sunday while the rest of the programme takes place Saturday.

Reigning champions Bordeaux will tackle newly-promoted Troyes, who are yet to score a point and will not be expected to do so at the Parc Lescur.

However, striker Lilian Laslandes is a major doubt for the champions.

Sedan have fared better than their two fellow promoted clubs so far and visit Auxerre, whose veteran coach Guy Roux can again call on the services of Chilean defender Pedro Reyes, who arrived late after a summer that involved Copa America duty.

Monaco host Bastia and Montpellier visit Strasbourg in the other matches Saturday, while Nancy take on Le Havre at home.

Everton rookie take back request

LIVERPOOL, England, Aug 13: Everton manager Walter Smith on Thursday confirmed teenage striker Francis Jeffers had withdrawn his transfer request after clear-the-air talks.

The 18-year-old stunned Everton by slapping in a transfer request last Friday on the eve of the new season, reports AFP.

Jeffers was left out of Everton's squad for the opening Premiership clash against champions Manchester United.

But he appeared as a substitute at Aston Villa on Wednesday and Smith revealed that a "misunderstanding" between him and Jeffers over the player's contract had been resolved.

"We've now clarified the situation to the degree that both parties are happy and Francis has withdrawn his transfer request," Smith told Everton ClubCall.

Kenya's worry

NAIROBI, Aug 13: Less than a week before the World Championships in Seville, Kenyan athletics chiefs have expressed worries that the selected athletes may not do well as expected due to running fatigue, reports AFP.

Kenya Amateur Athletic Association (KAAA) chairman Isaiiah Kiplagat claimed on Thursday that the country's top athletes have run so many races in the IAAF Golden League series that they now appear burnt out before Seville.

"We have to be worried because if we don't perform well (in Seville), people will roast us," Kiplagat told a luncheon in honour of part of the athletics squad in camp for the World Championships.

Kiplagat said that during Wednesday's Golden League meeting in Zurich, athletes including Bernard Barmasai and Noah Ngeny, looked too tired to mount any serious challenge on their opponents.

Laying the blame on foreign agents, Kiplagat said they should not be allowed to make athletes "run like horses".

Kiplagat added that the KAAA will bring the issue of agents up for discussion at the IAAF Congress meeting in Seville, Spain.

Davenport in qtrs

MANHATTAN BEACH, California, Aug 13: Top seed and defending champion Lindsay Davenport advanced to the quarterfinals of the WTA Tour Acira Classic Thursday with a straight-set win over Anke Huber, reports AFP.

Davenport, who defeated Huber in two close sets in the quarterfinals at Carlsbad, California, last week before losing in the semifinals, broke Huber in the opening game and cruised to a 6-2, 6-2 win.

The American, whose failure to defend her Carlsbad title cost her world number one ranking last week, said she felt refreshed after several days off.

She said relinquishing the world number one ranking to Switzerland's Martina Hingis didn't bother her.

Davenport next faces 1995 champion Conchita Martinez of Spain, who beat American Cornia Morariu 7-5, 6-2.

On the same day that Davenport played her first match of the tournament, sixth-seeded US teenage Serena Williams became the first player to secure a semifinal berth when she beat fourth seed Arantxa Sanchez Vicario of Spain 6-2, 6-3 on Thursday night.

Seventh-seeded Austrian Barbara Schett booked a quarterfinal clash with Hingis when Natasha Zvereva of Belarus retired from their second round match with a sprained ankle.

Bailey to skip 100 metres in Seville

ZURICH, Switzerland, Aug 13: Canada's former 100m world recordholder Donovan Bailey said on Thursday that he would not attempt to regain his world title in Seville later this month but would run in the 4x100m relay in which the Canadians are defending champions, reports AFP.

The 31-year-old, who spent nine months out of action after rupturing his Achilles tendon last September while playing basketball, explained that he still lacked the aggression in his running for him to pose a serious challenge to bitter arch-rival Maurice Greene, the current world recordholder and reigning world champion.

"I can maintain my aggression and power for 80 per cent of the race but that is still only occasionally and I don't feel that that's good enough," he said.

However, Bailey, who is focussing on defending his Olympic title in Sydney next year, said that while Greene may be winning everything at the moment he could well be surprised when it came to the World Championships in less than two weeks time.

"I think he's in for a big surprise from my two training partners Obadele Thompson and Bruny Surin," Bailey said.

Bailey, who also has a successful marketing consultancy, believed that the more experienced Surin, who was runner-up behind Bailey in the 1995 World Championships, had more chance of claiming the crown than Thompson, despite the latter beating him regularly this season.

"Bruny can do it, there's no question about it, but only if he really believes in himself and that is his big problem," Bailey said.



Pete Sampras reacting after hitting a good return during his match against German Rainer Schuttler at the ATP Championship on August 12. —AFP photo

Pete, Andre in last eight

MASON, Ohio, Aug 13: Winning his third-round match over Rainer Schuttler of Germany was not easy for top-seeded Pete Sampras, but he eventually served himself a 7-5, 7-6 (7-2) victory on Thursday for a 28th birthday present, reports Reuters.

Since the ATP Championship is located nearly an hour outside of Cincinnati, Sampras was at a loss how to celebrate his birthday, suggesting that a popular but lower echelon American roadside eatery might be the only option.

"What am I doing tonight?" what am I doing tonight?" Sampras, who is cruising on a 19-match winning streak "You tell me what should I do — go to the Waffle House which I've been at (this week)? It took them a while to figure it out (who I am) when I went there."

Joining Sampras in the ATP Championship quarterfinals is fellow American Andre Agassi, who had an even more difficult road to the final eight.

Agassi, the reigning French Open champ, played a tentative match, needing six match points to finally beat pesky

42nd-ranked Jiri Novak of the Czech Republic 7-6 (7-3), 7-6 (7-5).

"I hit my shorts the best when I take them early and I felt a little flat-footed tonight," said Agassi, who is 2-2 in career meetings against his next opponent, sixth-seeded Gustavo Kuerten of Brazil.

"I started getting careful and once you start getting careful, things break down," said Agassi.

Seven of the eight top seeds and 58th-ranked American Michael Chang are into the quarter-finals at this star-studded tournament.

Sampras, who has won the last three tournaments he played at Queens Club, Wimbledon and Los Angeles, will face a major challenge in the quarterfinals against seventh-seeded Richard Krajicek.

The Dutchman, who beat 105th-ranked Justin Gimelstob 6-4, 6-2 in the third round, has beaten Sampras six of the eight times they have played, including their last four outings.

"No question, he has my number, you know," Sampras said. "These past three or four times, he's beaten me pretty convincingly."

The other quarter-final pairings pit second-seeded and defending champion Patrick Rafter of Australia against Chang, and fourth-seeded Yevgeny Kafelnikov of Russia against fifth-seeded Tim Henman of Britain.

Sampras, who recently surpassed Ivan Lendl's record of 270 overall weeks at the number one ranking and is currently in his 272nd overall week in the top spot, struggled to get into a groove.

He was the first to falter in the first set, losing his serve in the fifth game. Sampras recovered to break the 49th-ranked Schuttler's serve in the 10th and 12th games.

"I felt I wasn't finding my range early on in the match," Sampras said. "I knew eventually I was going to come around, and even if I would have lost the first set, I still felt like there's no reason to panic getting down a break."

Sampras exchanged service breaks with Schuttler in the second set — losing his serve in the fifth game at 30-40 on a second double fault in the game. But Sampras dominated the tiebreaker, in which he served two aces over 130 mph (209 kph).

Sotomayor to miss Seville meet

HAVANA, Aug 13: Cuban sports officials have ruled out the participation of star high jumper Javier Sotomayor, the centre of controversy after testing positive for cocaine, at an upcoming competition in Spain due to injury, reports Reuters.

"We are not going to let him compete in Seville, we are going to keep studying him... He needs an operation," Dr. Rodrigo Alvarez Cambras, the head of Cuba's medical team in Winnipeg, Canada, said on state television late Wednesday.

Alvarez said Sotomayor suffered a back injury at the recent Pan American Games in Winnipeg and had later been found to be also suffering from a hernia.

Sotomayor won a gold medal at Winnipeg, his fourth successive Pan American Games triumph, but had it stripped days later after the positive doping test. He has denied taking drugs, claiming he was the victim of a set-up.

Now Sotomayor is at his Havana home awaiting to hear if he will be prohibited from international competition for two years, the normal sanction in such cases. That could finish the 31-year-old Cuban's career.

In Moscow, Russian athletics chief Valentin Balakhnichyov called Thursday on the International Amateur Athletic Federation to ban Cuba's high jump world record holder. "I truly believe the same rule should apply for everyone," the president of the Russian Athletics Federation told a news conference.

"And I don't see any reason why Sotomayor should be allowed to compete in Seville. If you been caught doping, you must serve time. As simple as that."

Prior to the doctor's announcement, Sotomayor had said at the weekend that he still wanted to compete in this month's world championships in Seville, Spain. Cuba is backing his claims of innocence, suggesting even that the CIA or Cuban exiles, opposed to President Fidel Castro's government, may have spiked his food in

Winnipeg.

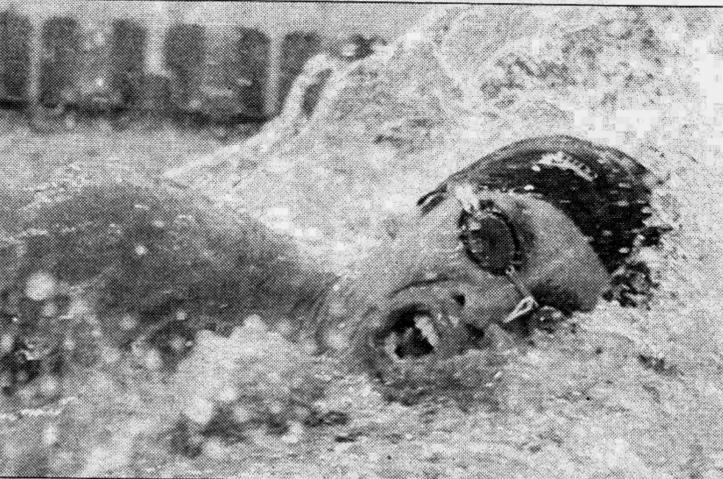
The IAAF said they had no immediate plans to suspend Sotomayor and first wanted the Cuban federation to make decision on the athlete.

However, Balakhnichyov, who is also a vice-president of the European Athletics Federation, said: "There may be additional circumstances in his case but that doesn't mean he should be left un punished."

On a special television programme Wednesday night attended by all Cuba's top sports officials, they defended indignantly the reputation of Sotomayor, who is a national hero in Cuba.

"Sotomayor has submitted to these tests before more than 100 times... including surprise urine tests in his house," said Alberto Juantorea, president of the Cuban Athletics Federation. "We will defend Sotomayor with absolute confidence."

The athlete hurt his back during the winning jump of 2.30 meters at Winnipeg. His world record is 2.45 meters.



Thailand's Vicha Ratanachote in action during the SEA Games men's 200m-freestyle final yesterday. He clinched the gold medal. —AFP photo

Yeo sets pool on fire

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Aug 13: Defending champions Indonesia threw in the towel Friday as Malaysia and Thailand battled it out for the right to replace the fallen giants as the new Southeast Asian (SEA) Games champions, reports AFP.

Delegation chief Major General Hidarot Mohammad beat a hasty retreat and apologised to his 200 million countrymen, offering to quit his post at the Indonesian Olympic Committee after his country's slump.

Two years ago — on home soil — the Indonesians feasted greedily on medals, snaffling a massive 194 gold medals.

Two years on however, and Indonesia has been left clinging to third place with a comparatively meagre 38 gold with two days of competition left.

"I am prepared to step down," said Hidarot, a vice president of the council responsible for training the 440 athletes who came to the Brunei Games.

Indonesia have 12 gold less than the Malaysians who are one up on the Thais.

Hidarot said their haul was far short of the 58-gold target. Though there were still 45 gold medals to play for before the Games' closing ceremony on Sunday night, their chances of winning the lion's share of these are slim.

Indonesia defiantly signed off at the swimming pool as Albert Sutanto set a new SEA Games record of 2mins 2.06secs in 200m men's butterfly.

But it was reigning pool queen Jocelin Yeo who stole the show as the injured 20-year-old Singapore star put 16-year-old

old Thai pretender Piliin Tachakittiranan firmly in her place with a record-shattering 26.23sec effort in the 50m freestyle. Piliin settled for the silver.

Yeo took her sixth gold by winning the 400m individual medley, also in record time of 4:51.87.

Piliin's fairytale show ended at six gold after she was also beaten into second place by

Chinese's one medal mission

BEIJING, Aug 13: China's aim at this month's World Athletics Championships in Seville is to win a medal, irrespective of colour, a top Chinese athletics official declared here Thursday, reports AFP.

The world's most populous nation is dispatching 33 athletes to Seville but the squad lacks the punch of members of the powerful Ma's Army group of athletes.

Controversial trainer Ma Junren is refusing to release any of her middle and long distance graduates leaving China's best chances of glory resting on Yu Guohui and Liu Hongyu in the men's and women's 20km walk.

This has brought a stinging rebuke from the local media which accuses Ma Junren of seeking to humiliate the national athletics federation.

China is also without retired shot putters Li Melsu, Huang Zhihong and Sui Xinmel.

teammate Praphsai Minpraphal in the 200m butterfly. Thailand should now be favourites to win the overall SEA Games title with 10 of their boxers fighting in the finals on Saturday, when their football team will also dispute the gold against Vietnam.

The Malaysians meanwhile are well placed for possible victories in badminton and sepak takraw, lawn bowls, ten-pin bowling, cycling, squash and hockey.

"I'm not going to blame others. We will be eventually blamed even if we have tried our best," Indonesia's Hidarot told reporters.

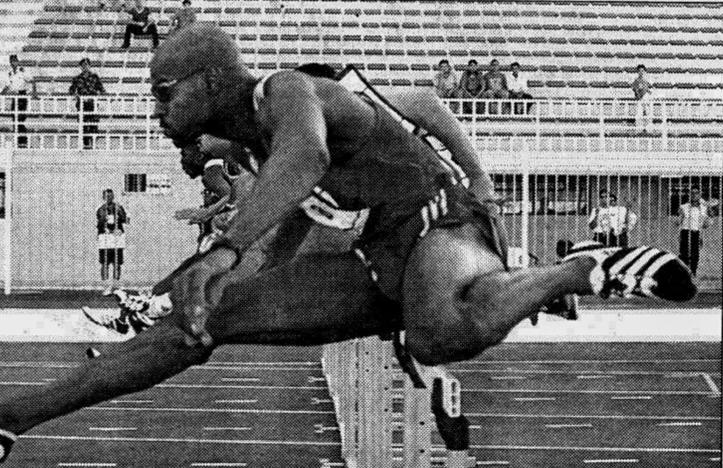
"We cannot satisfy the people's expectations." Indonesia were champions for all but two of the biennial Games since 1977. Thailand upstaged them in Bangkok in 1985 and in Chiang Mai four years ago.

Hidarot said Indonesia only had a short time to train, and many events were taken off the program by the first time hosts Brunei who only had enough facilities for 21.

Earlier Friday, Vietnam and Singapore paraded their prowess in the ancient and obscure martial art of pencak silat to bag three gold medals each.

Singapore lie fourth overall with 18 gold while Vietnam are disputing the fifth spot with the Philippines with 14 gold each.

The Filipinos failed to add to their gold tally on Friday, but they did set a record-winning margin in basketball when they crushed Cambodia, 137-34, in a qualifying round game.



Mubarak Khouisef Ali of Qatar clears the final hurdle to win the Pan-Arab Games 110 metres hurdles in Amman on August 12. —AFP photo

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer. A crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down. Includes a solution time of 22 mins and a cryptic clue: 'The Cryptic clue is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.'