

## Euro bosses meet Blatter

ZURICH, Switzerland, Aug 24: Bosses from some of Europe's elite football clubs on Monday called on FIFA president Sepp Blatter to drastically reduce the number of international friendlies, reports AFP.

A two-hour meeting between members of the so-called G-14 group of top European sides and the head of football's world governing body discussed moves aimed at harmonising the European calendar.

Blatter backed a proposal from the sides to re-structure the programme in order to form blocks in the year splitting domestic and continental club competitions, for national team matches and holidays.

The clubs told Blatter they were not opposed in principle to his controversial notion of staging the World Cup every two years.

But this was accompanied by a proviso that the overall calendar was properly synchronised. They also called for national federations to take over players' salaries while on national team duty.

Blatter, in turn, said FIFA would be looking at a suggestion to cut to four the number of days clubs should free players for national matches.

The G-14 delegation, fronted by Real Madrid president Lorenzo Sanz, was made up of delegates from AC Milan, Bayern Munich, Juventus, Olympique Marseille and FC Porto.

Other clubs in the group not present at the Zurich talks are Ajax, Barcelona, Borussia Dortmund, Inter Milan, Liverpool, Manchester United, Paris St Germain and PSV Eindhoven.

The discussions were the first of their kind between club bosses and the international football federation without the involvement of national federations.

## Shalimov banned for doping

MILAN, Aug 24: Napoli's Russian international Igor Shalimov has tested positive for the banned anabolic steroid nandrolone and has been suspended from Italian soccer, the Italian Football League revealed on Monday, reports Reuters.

It said Shalimov failed a drug test after a Serie B match between Napoli and Lecce on May 16.

The League said in a statement after an executive meeting on Saturday that the former Spartak Moscow and Inter Milan midfielder had been suspended as a cautionary measure.

Shalimov, 30, made his debut for Spartak Moscow aged 17 and played for them between 1989 and 1991 before moving to Italy where he joined Foggia, then in Serie A.

He moved to Inter Milan a year later and after two seasons at the San Siro was moved to Germany's MSV Duisburg and Switzerland's Lugano.

He returned to Italy in 1995 and played for Udinese and Bologna before joining Serie B side Napoli last season.

Shalimov made his international debut for the Soviet Union at the 1990 World Cup. He played his last match for the Russians last year.

British, Linford Christie, the former 100 metres Olympic champion, and veteran Jamaican sprinter Merlene Ottey have both recently tested positive for nandrolone.

## USA didn't invite Iraqi booters

WASHINGTON, Aug 24: US government officials and the country's soccer federation strenuously denied Monday Iraqi claims that its nation's national football team had been invited to play in the United States, reports AFP.

The State Department, which would have to issue visas to the players, denied knowing anything about the alleged invitations which the Iraqi News Agency (INA) said were issued by the American national soccer federation.

"We have no information about any event and we have no idea of what the Iraqis are talking about," a State Department official told AFP, after spokesman James Foley told a news briefing he would look into the matter.

Jim Moorehouse, communications director for the US Soccer Federation, the organization that sanctions all international football events in the United States, also said no invitations had been issued.

"We have had no contact with Iraq and we have no plans to play them," Moorehouse told AFP by phone from the federation's Chicago headquarters.

"We don't know where the reports are coming from but we do know that we haven't been in touch with the Iraqis."

Moorehouse allowed that a third party or promoter might have been in contact with the Iraqis but said even then, any matches organized would still have to be authorized by the federation.

"I guess there's a chance they could be trying to solidify things before they approach us but eventually we would have to sanction the games and we haven't heard word one about anything like this in the world."

Earlier Monday, INA said the country's national football team had been invited to play matches in the United States for the first time since the Gulf War.

## Serie A's 'super seven'



MILAN, Aug 24: All eyes will be on the "Magnificent Seven" this weekend - when the stars of the Serie A begin potentially the toughest season in the history of Italian football, reports AFP.

No fewer than seven clubs, nearly half the Serie A, have a real chance of winning the coveted title after a record-breaking re-shuffle of the top players - particularly where it counts, in front of goal.

Traditionally, the title is destined for Turin or Milan. This time, champions AC Milan, Inter, Lazio, AS Roma, Ju-

ventus.

Backed by the Tanzi family's Parmalat milk empire, the team who won last season's UEFA and Italian Cups are ready for a serious title challenge after paying Udinese more than 40 million dollars for two players: Brazilian Marcelo Amoroso and Ghana's Stephen Appiah.

Vieri, meanwhile, represents less than half of Inter's off-season spending as they re-build the team for new coach Marcello Lippi - the man who made Italian, European and world champions out of Juventus.

At Inter, both optimism and money are in unlimited supply thanks to the deep pockets of the club's backers, oil refinery tycoon Massimo Moratti, and tyre manufacturers Pirelli.

Loyal fans have also invested in Moratti's Dream Team by queuing up to buy season tickets. The San Siro club expects to at least match last season's record sales figure of nearly 60,000.

The council-owned stadium's other tenants, AC Milan, are also expecting a bumper harvest from the fans after unexpectedly following two years of misery with the club's 16th league title.

The club president, TV tycoon and former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who admits he didn't splash out on Ronaldo two years ago for fear of damaging his public image, has again been careful in his spending.

The club, celebrating the 100th year since its founding by a nostalgic English ex-pat as the "Milan Cricket and Football Club", has also bucked the popular trend by buying Italian instead of foreign.

Seven of their nine signees this summer were home-grown after Milan found out the hard way that too many players trying to integrate into a new country, culture, football and language causes trouble.

Juventus will, meanwhile, be hoping that Del Piero continues his successful return from knee surgery and takes them back to the top after probably the worst season in their illustrious history.

Juventus finished only sixth in the table, saw their coach resign and were unbelievably dumped out of the European Cup semi-finals by Manchester United after leading 2-0 in front of their home fans.

"The Old Lady", as the club is known in Italy, was not amused.

RONALDO

ventus, Parma and Fiorentina all have a legitimate claim to the championship.

The money which has been pumped into clubs in recent years by their multi-millionaire owners, for whom a football team is pretty cash within a vast business empire, plus the advent of satellite television rights, has transformed the landscape of Italian soccer.

Today, the stories that dominate Italy's sports pages have one thing in common -- money: the world record 50 million dollar fee paid by Inter for Lazio's Christian Vieri, the record 5.5 million dollar net salary wrung from Juventus by Alessandro Del Piero and the fruitless haggling over tens of millions of dollars by Lazio and Juventus for Arsenal's Nicolas Anelka.

Italian clubs have come into money and now they are spending it.

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## Now or never for Parma



PARIS, Aug 24: Australian international Tony Vidmar believes

Rangers have the strength up front to make the group stages of the European Champions League on Wednesday and set off a night of celebration in Glasgow, reports AFP.

Dick Advocaat's side set off for Parma on Monday to finalise their preparations for the third qualifying round, second-leg match on Wednesday night.

Rangers hold a 2-0 advantage thanks to goals from Vidmar and American midfielder Claudio Reyna two weeks ago.

Both men were back on target at the weekend in the comfortable 4-1 victory against Dundee United with Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Rod Wallace also on the scoresheet.

Rangers lost to Parma in the UEFA Cup last season but manager Advocaat has strengthened his squad since last December.

Vidmar said: "If we can stay as a unit for the whole game then I think we can hold them out. With Michael Mols, Rod Wallace and Claudio Reyna playing as they are, we also have the firepower to score over there.

We know, of course, we still have a lot of hard work in front of us but if we stick to our game plan we have a chance.

"I don't think it makes sense to go over there and sit in and defend. We have to try and get a goal and that would be fantastic.

"It's a Cup final for us, no doubt about that, and the players know what's at the end of the rainbow."

Vidmar could face Parma striker Hernan Crespo, who is expected to be included in the starting line-up after missing the first leg because of a hip injury.

Crespo showed he is getting back to full fitness after scoring in the 2-1 win against AC Milan at the weekend in the Italian Super Cup.

He said: "When I am playing I am in pain but that will not stop me playing against Rangers.

"I know I am not ready for a full 90 minutes and the coach knows it. But I will start the game and I will give everything until I have nothing left."

Fabio Cannavaro will miss the game after being sent off at Ibrox. Salvo Lassisi, who was ruled out of the first leg because of a virus, will come in.

Coach Alberto Malesani insists it won't be the end of the world if his side lose to Rangers.

"At first glance it could be a disaster for us to go out of the competition," he said. "But you must evaluate the work of the team at the end of the season and not just one match."

"If we don't go into the Champions League but win the Scudetto, I think the Parma supporters would prefer that."

Chelsea have an easier task than Rangers as they defend a

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Vieri, meanwhile, represents less than half of Inter's off-season spending as they re-build the team for new coach Marcello Lippi - the man who made Italian, European and world champions out of Juventus.

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