

### China delays naming coach

SHANGHAI, Jan 3: China is not expected to name a national coach before February, despite an approaching four-nation friendly tournament with Uruguay, Jamaica and New Zealand later this month, sports sources said today, reports AFP.

"Whilst they have four or five candidates they are considering... no decision is likely before Chinese (Lunar) New Year," a source close to the Chinese Football Association said, referring to the long holiday starting February 5.

Despite furious media speculation about who is the front-runner, the source said there is no clear favourite at the moment and that officials are even looking at other coaches "who have sent their CVs in."

It appears likely an interim coach will guide the team at the Four Nations Championship to be played in southern Guangzhou city this month.

China is scheduled to face last year's Oceania champions New Zealand on January 14. If they prevail, they will take on the winner between Jamaica and favourites Uruguay two days later.

The source said as recently as last week, China appeared close to signing a deal with colourful Serb coach Bora Milutinovic, who guided Nigeria to the 1998 World Cup finals in France.

"Now it's being held back by the Ministry of Sports," he said, adding that Milutinovic may still emerge as the eventual choice.

The ministry has demanded a less hurried process that would produce a comprehensive long-term strategy — of which filling the current vacancy should be only one part, he said.

Part of that strategy is grooming a home-grown head coach for the future.

Any foreign coach who takes on the job will have to agree to four or five Chinese coaches being tightly integrated into the new national coaching squad, the source said.

Beijing is also mulling the idea of leaving room in the budget for temporary stints by foreign consultants — such as in goalkeeping or preparing for a specific opponent.

He cast doubt on reports that Argentina's former star striker Mario Kempes had been offered a 750,000-dollar salary to coach China, saying: "I haven't heard that name mentioned."

China is looking for someone who has successfully taken a small football nation to the World Cup finals or dramatically improved their FIFA ranking, he said.

"Kempes doesn't have that pedigree."

The president of Bolivian runner-up club The Strongest, Jorge Sier, said last week that Kempes was vacating the club's coaching position because China had made a salary offer he could not compete against.

The source confirmed that Chinese authorities were prepared to pay top dollar for the right coach.

"They're financially stable enough to do that," he said, adding that government support behind achieving long-cherished dream World Cup qualification was strong.

China on December 10 sacked Britain's Bobby Houghton — who coached the country's national and Olympic sides for 18 months — for his failure to clinch a berth in the Sydney 2000 Games.

## Edmundo could be fit



UNDATED, Jan 3 (Reuters/AFP): Vasco da Gama striker Edmundo is making a quicker than expected recovery from injury and may play in his team's World Cup Championship opener on Thursday.

Edmundo, who pulled a thigh muscle during a Brazilian match in December, had been expected to miss the game against Australia's South Melbourne and, possibly, the whole tournament because of a pulled thigh muscle.

But team doctor Fernando Mattar said on Sunday: "He's been making a very quick recovery."

Coach Antonio Lopes said Edmundo might even play for the last few minutes of a friendly against the Algeria national side on Monday.

Edmundo sustained the injury in a match earlier in December, then aggravated it.

Club director Eurico Miranda threatened to slash Edmundo's salary after blaming the aggravation on a night out but backed down when the player apologised and vowed that he was fully committed to getting fit for the competition.

If Edmundo recovers in time for Thursday's match, he will line-up alongside former World Cup star Romario to form an attacking pair that has not played together for Vasco in a competitive match.

The pair have also had personal differences in the last year and commentators have wondered how the two flawed geniuses will fit into the same side.

Romario gave Vasco fans a scare when he limped out of a training session on Friday but Lopes guaranteed that it was nothing serious.

Vasco are taking the tournament so seriously that they

have planned their entire season around it and signed former internationals Jorginho, Romario and Junior Baiano to reinforce a team that had a disappointing last season.

### RAJA CARRIES AFRICAN HOPES

The strength of African club football at the highest level will be tested for the first time when Raja Casablanca on Morocco compete this week.

The weekend that Raja could struggle.

The Green Devils were outclassed 4-1 in a warm-up match by local side Vasco da Gama, who are in the other group with Manchester United of England, Nexaca of Mexico and South Melbourne of Australia.

At the final whistle, there were no forlorn Moroccan faces, only a gleam at a chance to pose for autographed pictures with Brazilian star Romario, a recent addition to the Vasco squad.

It will not help Raja that coach and father figure Luis Oscar Fullone from Argentina is thousands of kilometres away in a Paris clinic having tests for a three-week illness.

Fullone complained of tiredness after Raja shocked Esperance of Tunisia in the Champions League final last month and his place on the touchline goes to former Moroccan international Fathi Jamal.

A place in the world Championship guaranteed Raja 2.5 million dollars — small change for the giants of Europe, but a huge amount in the cash-scarce world of African club football.

The best known Raja players are goalkeeper Mustapha Chadli, a member of the 1998 Morocco World Cup squad, midfielders Jirindou and Reda Eryahi and striker Mustapha Moustaudia.

With an average age of 23, Raja are clearly looking beyond Brazil with Said Kherazi the 'baby' at 17 and Moustaudia, a survivor of the 1997 Champions League-winning team, the oldest at 31.

That leaves a youthful Raja side led by fiery midfielder Abdelatif Jirindou battling to avoid bottom spot with an Al-Nassr squad that includes Moroccan Ahmed Bahja and Smahi Triki.

Apart from an annual, two-leg tie with their Asian counterparts, Champions League winners get no competitive exposure outside Africa and there were signs in Rio de Janeiro at

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### Benfica continue spending spree

LISBON, Jan 3: Portuguese footballing giants Benfica continued their mid-season buying spree on Sunday by clinching the signature of Chilean international midfielder Christian Uribe from Colo Colo, reports AFP.

The 23-year-old, who signed a one-year contract with the two-time European Cup winners, is the third player to join Benfica in recent weeks.

Earlier 25-year-old Egyptian international striker Abdelstar Sabry and Greek defender Triantafyllos Mahatridis were lured from PAOK Salonika.

Benfica, who won their 30th title back in 1994 but have not been champions since, are currently third in the championship — four points off leaders Porto — but were humiliated by Spanish side Celta Vigo in the third round of the UEFA Cup, losing 8-1 on aggregate.

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BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: A Star file of England's 1966 World Cup-winning team. Five members of that illustrious squad, Nobby Stiles (back row 2nd from L), Roger Hunt (back row 3rd from L), George Cohen (back row 3rd from R), Ray Wilson (back row 2nd from R) and Alan Ball (front row 2nd from R), were, after more than three decades, rewarded with MBEs on Friday.

## 'Forgotten five' recognised

LONDON, Jan 3: The "forgotten five" of England's 1966 World Cup winning side were rewarded on Friday with MBEs on the Queen's New Year's Honours List, reports AFP.

Alan Ball, Nobby Stiles, George Cohen, Ray Wilson and Roger Hunt were all honoured with Members of the Order of the British Empire for their part in England's 4-2 win over West Germany at Wembley on July 30, 1966.

They were the only players yet to receive recognition for English football's finest hour, with hat-trick star Geoff Hurst and Bobby Charlton both knighted and late Bobby Moore, Martin Peters, Jack Charlton and Gordon Banks also honoured.

Fellow midfielder Stiles is best remembered for his wide, toothless grin as he danced around Wembley holding aloft the Jules Rimet trophy following England's extra-time victory.

"I am really pleased by this," said the former Manchester United star. "It is great news for all concerned but everybody who knows me appreciates that I will just carry on as normal."

Hurst, whose last-minute strike set the seal on England's only World Cup win, spoke of his satisfaction that the rest of his teammates had finally been honoured.

"At long last we have been identified as a team who won the World Cup and not just some individuals and therefore it is fitting that the five lads have been given this reward," he said.

"It's just a shame that Bobby Moore and Alf couldn't join in the celebrations."

"These honours are deserved for men who helped provide every football supporter and the nation as a whole with England's finest moment on the football field."

Full-back Cohen was capped 37 times by England, and his forays forward allowed Ramsey to adopt his famous 'Wingless Wonders' formation.

"I am absolutely thrilled," said the former Fulham star. "It is just a shame that Alf isn't around to see us all receive these awards and that it happened in the year he died."

England's other full-back, Ray Wilson, said: "I am absolutely delighted. But this won't change my life as I have basically kept a low profile ever since giving up the game."

Ex-Liverpool striker Roger Hunt said: "For years they have called me Sir Roger in Liverpool and now I have got an official honour for them to talk about this is terrific news."

There were Knights for two British sporting icons of the 1960s: heavyweight boxer Henry Cooper and Grand Prix driver Stirling Moss, while CBEs went to former World Number One golfer Laura Davies and Olympic decathlete gold medalist Daley Thompson.

Among those named as Officers of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) were ice dance pair Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, athletics heroes Steve Ovett and Colin Jackson and Scotland's rugby union captain Gary Armstrong.

Other MBEs went to Viv Anderson, the first black to play international football for England, and former Arsenal and England striker Ian Wright.

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