

FIFA rankings

France hot on Brazil's heels

PARIS, July 5: Newly-crowned European Champions France nearly ended Brazil's reign at the top of FIFA's world rankings published Wednesday, as Italy and Portugal also made significant climbs, reports AFP.

Lagging 70 points behind only a month ago, France nearly polevaulted to the top with their dramatic extra-time Golden Goal win over Italy in Euro 2000's final last Sunday at Rotterdam.

The Czech Republic, who played some impressive football at Euro despite their first-round exit, remain in third while quarter-finalist Spain hold joint fourth with surging Argentina, who are unbeaten in South American World Cup qualifiers.

Losing finalist's Italy moved up eight places to sixth while the surprising Portuguese also moved up eight places to seventh with their semi-final appearance at Euro.

England have slumped to 15th after their failure to make an impact at Euro going out meekly in the first round after Kevin Keegan's side lost to Portugal and Romania in the group stages prompting a drop of three places.

Euro co-hosts Holland moved up 13 places to eighth after reaching the semi-finals only to throw away the match after dominating Italy before going out on penalties.

Outside the top 20, Japan moved up 11 places to 46th closely pursued by Honduras who also moved up 11 to 51st, while newly crowned Oceania champions Australia climbed 29 places to 63rd.

- RANKINGS:**
- Brazil 825 points, 2.
 - France 808, 3.
 - Czech Republic 753, 4.
 - Spain 744, 5.
 - Argentina 744, 6.
 - Italy 732, 7.
 - Portugal 717, 8.
 - Netherlands 713, 9.
 - Germany 711, 10.
 - Norway 708, 11.
 - Yugoslavia 705, 12.
 - Romania 701, 13.
 - Mexico 698, 14.
 - Croatia 694, 15.
 - England 691, 16.
 - Denmark 653, 17.
 - Colombia 650, 18.
 - Sweden 645, 19.
 - Paraguay 642, 20.
 - United States 639, 21.

Selects:

- Scotland 629, 39.
- Ireland 563, 46.
- Japan 541, 55.
- Canada 521, 95.
- Northern Ireland 410, 102.
- Wales 384

Athirson cleared

RIO DE JANEIRO, July 5: Brazilian defender Athirson, who was banned last month after failing a drug test, has been cleared by the Brazilian Football Federation (CBF) disciplinary commission, the CBF confirmed Wednesday, reports AFP.

The 23-year-old, who plays for top Brazilian side Flamengo, tested positive for banned amphetamines generally found in slimming tablets, following a Brazilian Cup match on May 31.

Athirson was suspended on June 15, however, his lawyers succeeded in convincing the CBF that the banned substances were being taken as part of medical treatment.

Mandela, Mbeki to miss the moment

JOHANNESBURG, July 5: Football fan Nelson Mandela will not be in Zurich Thursday when South Africa hopes to be named hosts of the 2006 World Cup tournament, reports AFP.

A spokesman for the former president, Zelda la Grange, told Business Day that he cannot travel to the Swiss city for the announcement because he is tired.

He has done his best to boost South Africa's chances of hosting the event, is fully behind the bid and hopes the country is chosen as hosts, La Grange told the Johannesburg-based daily.

South African bid committee officials said in Zurich that a hectic schedule prevented President Thabo Mbeki travelling. South Africa and Germany are favourites to win with England and Morocco outsiders.

The absence of Mandela, who regularly watches the national team and has shared in many of its triumphs, has not dampened spirits with most South Africans upbeat.

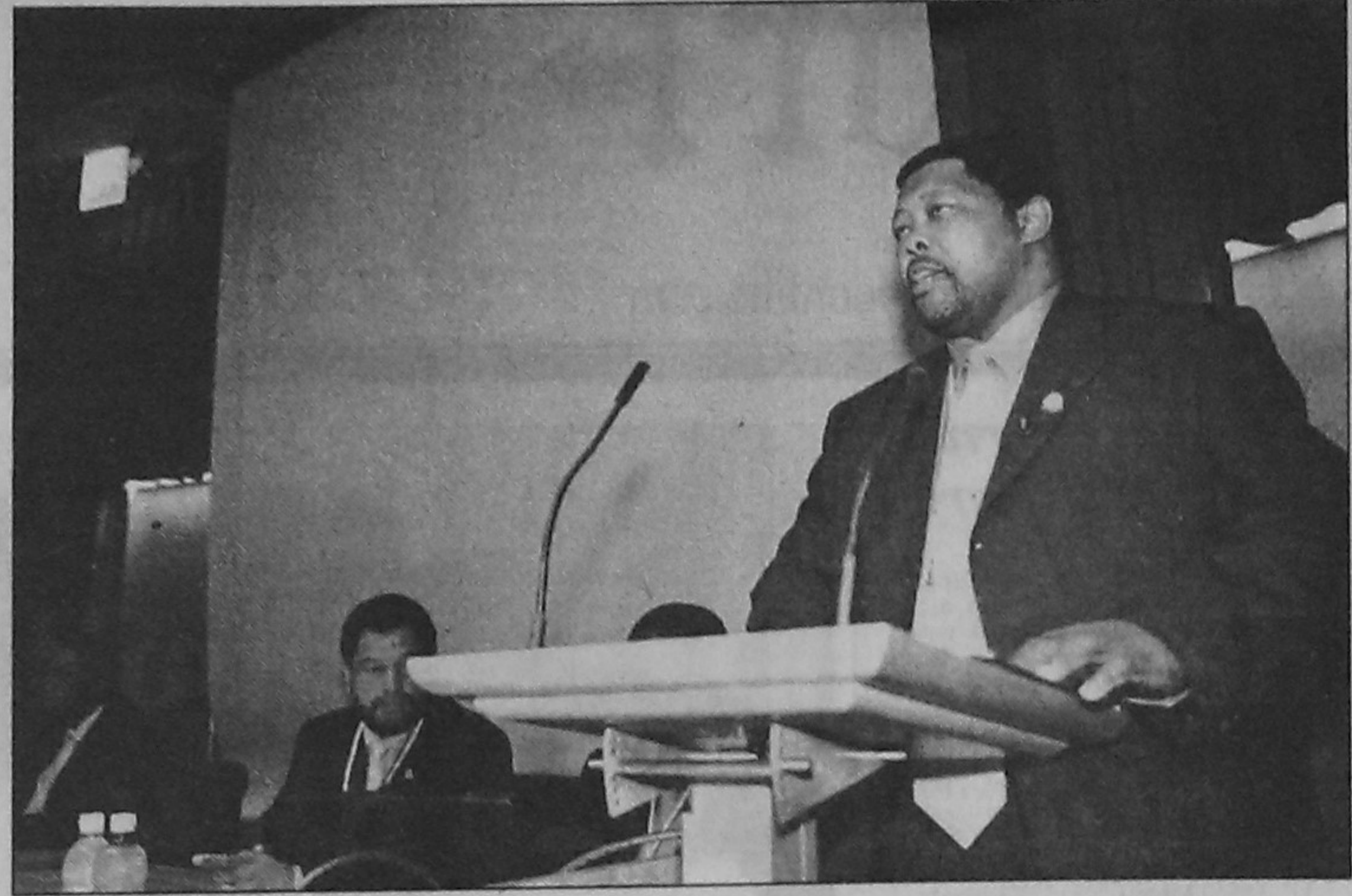
Shares in several construction companies rose on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange ahead of voting by a 24-man executive committee from world football governing body FIFA.

Some analysts believe the volatile rand will strengthen against the dollar if South Africa becomes the first African country to be selected hosts since the World Cup was launched 70 years ago in Uruguay.

Politicians also got in on the act with Cameron Tabane from the minority Pan Africanist Congress party urging compatriots to fast and pray that the quadrennial tournament is awarded to South Africa.

But the bookmaker who gave disgraced former national cricket captain Hansie Cronje 7,000 dollars and a leather jacket for match information does not share in the optimism.

"If you can get a bet on Germany at 3/1 it is good value," said Marlon Aronstam, who testified last month at a government inquiry into alleged match fixing.



Ngeonde Balfour (R), the South African Sports Minister, presenting his country's bid for the football World Cup 2006 at FIFA headquarters in Zurich yesterday. —AFP photo

WC 2006 bid presentation

England plays final dice, SA echo Africa's call



ZURICH, Switzerland, July 5: England dealt their last card in their bid to win the right to host the 2006 World Cup here on Wednesday - the ethnic one, reports AFP.

Favourites South Africa by contrast tugged at the heartstrings of the 24 member FIFA Executive Committee, who will decide their fate on Thursday. Germany and Morocco were to give their final presentations in the afternoon.

England, who were advised two weeks ago by CONCACAF President Jack Warner to pull out of the race to avoid being humiliated, produced slick films with lacklustre presentation by campaign director Alec McGivan among others.

McGivan played on England's ability to fill their stadia and the passion that would engender - however, he painfully failed to inject any passion into the statement belying his past as a former campaign manager and for the failed political party the Social Democrats born with fanfare in 1980 and drowned as a damp squib 10 years later.

However, the most eye-brow-raising moment came as McGivan unashamedly played on the FIFA motto of all for football and football for all by declaring England is a multi-

ethnic society and that colour was not just a South African issue.

"The most surprising thing about this film is that all of it is from England and displays the many different cultures that play football there," he said.

"I thought I was watching the South African bid," quipped one observer.

While England rolled out two of their heroes of the 1966 World Cup Sir Bobby Charlton and Sir Geoff Hurst, who both played on the professionalism of the thousands of people involved in English football the South Africans played for a more simple device - that FIFA answer the prayers of the African people.

"In the last few days the people of South Africa have been lighting candles - candles of hope," said Irvin Khoza, Chairman of the South Africa bid committee.

"Hope for their date with destiny on Thursday," he added.

Chief Executive Danny Jordaan, who powered home his point of only being able to cast his first vote aged over 402 and said they had conducted their bid in the same way they had fought the Liberation struggle against apartheid, also played the FIFA family card but in more philosophical fashion than McGivan had.

"Just as Descartes said for European consumption 'I think therefore I am' so in Africa we

have a similar sentiment ... I am I belong therefore I am ... and that is part of the FIFA family," he said.

Jordaan, who said it would be unthinkable that as FIFA neared its centenary that Africa had never hosted the tournament, countered one of England's arguments that they the English were not just doing it for their country but for a continent.

"I ask you to hear the call from Africa not just of the 45 million South Africans but nearly 400 million Africans give us the World Cup," he said.

While South Africa's bid was nowhere near as slick as England's, Jordaan being drowned out by music, their rhetoric was unmatched as Jordaan illustrated in his final appeal.

"The World Cup is like a ship travelling the world," he said. "We are standing at the harbour's edge hoping to be the next port of call," he added.

The most famous line associated with the 1966 World Cup final was the commentator Kenneth Wolstenholme's "There are people on the pitch! They think it's all over ... it is now! As Hurst crashed in his third goal for England's greatest football moment, 'Sadly for England that was the sentiment topping the rounds about their bid' - ethnic society or no ethnic society - football as they like to put it will not be coming home in 2006.

2006 World Cup bidding

South Africa awash with expectation



JOHANNESBURG, July 5: South Africa was in tenterhooks Wednesday ahead of Thursday's announcement of the host for the 2006 World Cup, with investors' confidence sending prices sailing up on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, reports AFP.

The battle between South Africa, Morocco, Britain and Germany was splashed across several pages in most daily newspapers Wednesday, with The Star saying hopefully: "Our cup of dreams, just a touch away."

Said the Sowetan, read in the football-mad black townships: "It's our turn."

Shares in construction companies were notably firmer, with those for Murray and Roberts climbing by five percent and Group 5's non-voting shares by 11 percent Tuesday, the Pretoria News reported. The shares continued to increase Wednesday.

"That is an indication that there is great optimism, great expectation," a spokesman for the South African Chamber of Business told AFP Wednesday.

If South Africa wins the bid, two of the nine stadia chosen by the bid committee to host matches will be renovated and another four will have to be built by 2003.

"I see the renovations and new stadiums generating about one billion rand (148 million dollars / 155 million euros) in fixed investment," a building and construction analyst told the Pretoria News.

The positive sentiment was also rubbing off on the rand, although the recent release of good economic data and the conclusion of Zimbabwe's violence-marred elections have contributed, analysts said.

The rand was mid-Wednesday trading at 6.7575 to the dollar, its best level since a 7.1950 rand all-time low on May 25. "I think we have seen it definitely improve over the last couple of days," analyst Kevin Brady of Barnard, Jacobs and Millet said on SABC public radio.

"The big move started (Tuesday) night and it seems to be ahead of the soccer World Cup bid.

"I think there is a growing feeling that South Africa is in with an exceptionally good chance ... it could obviously have a very positive impact on South Africa, and that probably is the underlying reason for improving sentiment for the currency," he said.

James Rheeder, a money market analyst from Standard and Poor's, added: "It puts South Africa back on the map if a body like FIFA has confidence in our country - it's good for us."

"It will boost infrastructure, spending, economic growth, create jobs," he said.

If South Africa wins the bid, an estimated 10 billion rand will be invested in the country, and about 129,000 new jobs will be created, according to current calculations.

At about 30 percent, unemployment is one of the country's major headaches.

Hosting the event would add about 9.7 billion rand to South Africa's gross domestic product, which totalled 801 billion rand in 1999, the bid committee has estimated.

"It will also bind South Africans behind a united goal," said the Chamber spokesman. "I think we should get it and we deserve to get it," he said.

So does former president Nelson Mandela who on Tuesday announced his intention to "phone two countries to request them to favour us."

With the competition apparently down to the wire between South Africa and Germany, the tiny Pan Africanist Congress party has urged South Africans to fast and pray to win the tournament.

It would "naturally mean everything to the Africans throughout the continent" if the event was held in Africa for the first time, it said.



French international striker David Trezeguet (R) shaking hands with Luciano Moggi (L), the general director of Serie A giants Juventus during his presentation to the media at Turin on July 4. —AFP photo

Berlusconi called to order

ROME, July 4: AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi was on Tuesday summoned to appear before the Italian Football Federation disciplinary commission to explain his virulent criticism of national coach Dino Zoff, reports AFP.

Berlusconi, a former Italian Prime Minister, described Zoff as a "dilettante" - an Italian word used to describe someone who is unprofessional in their approach.

"He has behaved like a dilettante," said Berlusconi, who described Zoff's behaviour during Euro 2000 as "unworthy".

"I am indignant," continued Berlusconi before criticising Zoff for not marking French playmaker Zinedine Zidane in the Euro 2000 Final - although Zidane's performance in the final was arguably his least impressive in the tournament.

"Even a dilettante would have understood, even a dilettante would have put a man on Zidane. The problem is we need someone with some intelligence in his brain while he (Zoff) has none."

Morocco for FIFA intervention on Brazil pull-out

RABAT, July 5: The vice president of Morocco's 2006 World Cup bid campaign has called on FIFA, football's governing body, to act in the wake of Brazil's pull-out and support for South Africa, reports AFP.

Said Belkhatay, who is also an executive committee member of the African Football Confederation (CAF), told local radio: "We are calling on FIFA to take decisions in this case."

He claimed it was "abnormal that a country would withdraw in this manner, adding: 'I regret Brazil's action.'"

Driss Benhima, president of Morocco's campaign, remained upbeat however, suggesting that Brazil's absence would help Morocco win through to the second round of voting in Thursday's ballot.

The four bidding countries, South Africa, Morocco, Germany and England, will make their final presentations before the FIFA executive committee on Wednesday and the vote taken on Thursday morning.

Brazil withdrew from the race and promised to support favourites South Africa in return for South Africa's support in their attempt to secure the 2010 World Cup.

Juve welcome Trezeguet

TURIN, Italy, July 4: French Euro-2000 star David Trezeguet arrived at his new club Italian Serie A giants Juventus here on Tuesday, reports AFP.

The 22-year-old, who scored the winner in France's victory over Italy on Sunday, has signed a five-year contract at Juventus who paid French outfit Monaco 22 million dollars for him.

"You wanted a major coup and here he is," said Juventus general manager Luciano Moggi to the crowd of journalists.

Trezeguet is called Treze-gol in France in homage to AS Roma's Gabriel Batistuta, his idol and nicknamed Batigol.

"Yes, he's my idol but I don't know if I'll manage to play as well as him," he said.

Trezeguet also spoke highly of the Serie A league itself.

"I know your league is the most difficult. Zidane (Zinedine) and Deschamps (Didier) have told me all about it. They also told me Juve is a huge, professional and very serious club. Some people say that I'm a difficult character, it's just that I've got a strong will to win and I'm here to win a place in the first team and do believe I'll manage that."

La Nacion, the Buenos Aires daily awarded Trezeguet personality of the week citing the pride of seeing one of Argentina's sons crowned champion of Europe.

The player grew up in Argentina where he played with Buenos Aires outfit Platense before moving to Monaco aged 17

World Cup 2006 bid presentation

Kaiser delivers a clincher



ZURICH, Switzerland, July 5: American circus impresario Phileas T. Barnum believed there was a sucker born every minute, reports AFP.

So it might have been on Wednesday as Franz Beckenbauer delivered what could be a sucker punch to the hopes of main rivals South Africa with a devastating performance in Germany's final presentation in front of the 24-member FIFA Executive who will decide their fate on Thursday.

While the man known as the Kaiser cracked jokes and brought in with a flourish Chancellor Gerhard Schroder, supermodel Claudia Schiffer and tennis star Boris Becker, their European opponents England were quite the opposite as two of the men who defeated him in the 1966 World Cup Sir Geoff Hurst and Sir Bobby Charlton looked like beaten men.

The English seemed to have realised that they were headed for the exit as they dealt their last card - the ethnic one.

Favourites South Africa, who have been sounding less upbeat of late, by contrast tugged at the heartstrings of the FIFA Executive Committee while Morocco went for broke

by declaring that the Moroccan people would not understand that the winner had been decided solely by internal FIFA politics and not on merit.

However, it was Beckenbauer who stole the show, entering the room with a piece of turf that he

says will be from where the 2006 World Cup will kick-off once it is placed in the centre circle in the Olympic Stadium in Munich.

Such was his confidence that the two-time World Cup winner (player in 1974 and coach in 1990) even brought out a miniature hotel and showed FIFA President Sepp Blatter where his penthouse would be, adding, one imagined, at South Africa's expense: "You'll be secure there."

Amid a flurry of films, one bringing back memories of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang as children ran round the streets of an old German town kicking a football - though without a sign of the infamous Child-catcher - Beckenbauer made a strong political point as to why Germany deserved to host it for the second time.

"You may think that we have already hosted one (1974) but then we were divided - between East and West Germany - now we are united," he said.

The Barnum of world football ended with a rather bizarre film of his nightmares which were not of the footballing sort but of being chased by a large dog and being almost swallowed by a fish - and the rather unsubtle singing of 'All we are saying is give us a chance' - but no one could deny the polish of the performance.



FRANZ BECKENBAUER

Blatter under scrutiny



ZURICH, Switzerland, July 5: FIFA president Sepp Blatter's credibility is on the line here on Thursday when the 24-man FIFA executive committee decide the host of the 2006 World Cup, reports AFP.

The 63-year-old Swiss has staked all on South Africa winning football's most glittering prize. At risk is his future as president.

Blatter has been campaigning actively to promote the South African bid ahead of their three other rivals Morocco, Germany and England.

But if the executive committee rejects Blatter's overtures and instead award the World Cup to Germany, the FIFA president will be severely weakened and left fighting for survival when he stands for re-election in 2002.

Blatter is a wily politician who masterminded an all-conquering campaign against European rival Lennart Johansson for the presidency of FIFA in Paris two years ago.

When the vote was announced at the FIFA Congress

Johansson sat stunned, unable to comprehend the crushing defeat he had suffered at the hands of the former FIFA secretary general.

But executive committee members warn that Blatter is no Havellange.

The Brazilian ran FIFA with an iron fist and his wishes were carried out.

"The atmosphere with Blatter in charge is much better. Everyone is allowed to have their say. It is more democratic," said one European member.

"That is his weakness," he added.

A year ago at the FIFA congress in Los Angeles the Asia members walked out, leaving Blatter furious. It was the first time in FIFA's history that such a snub had been delivered to a president.

That would never have happened with Havellange. It was a telling point about Blatter's authority," said a member at the Congress.

Earlier this year Blatter, when asked how he survived hours of sitting listening to delegates at Confederation meetings, replied: "I love the politics."

As a FIFA insider remarked: "Havellange would never have answered the question and even if he had his reply would have been 'I love the power.'"

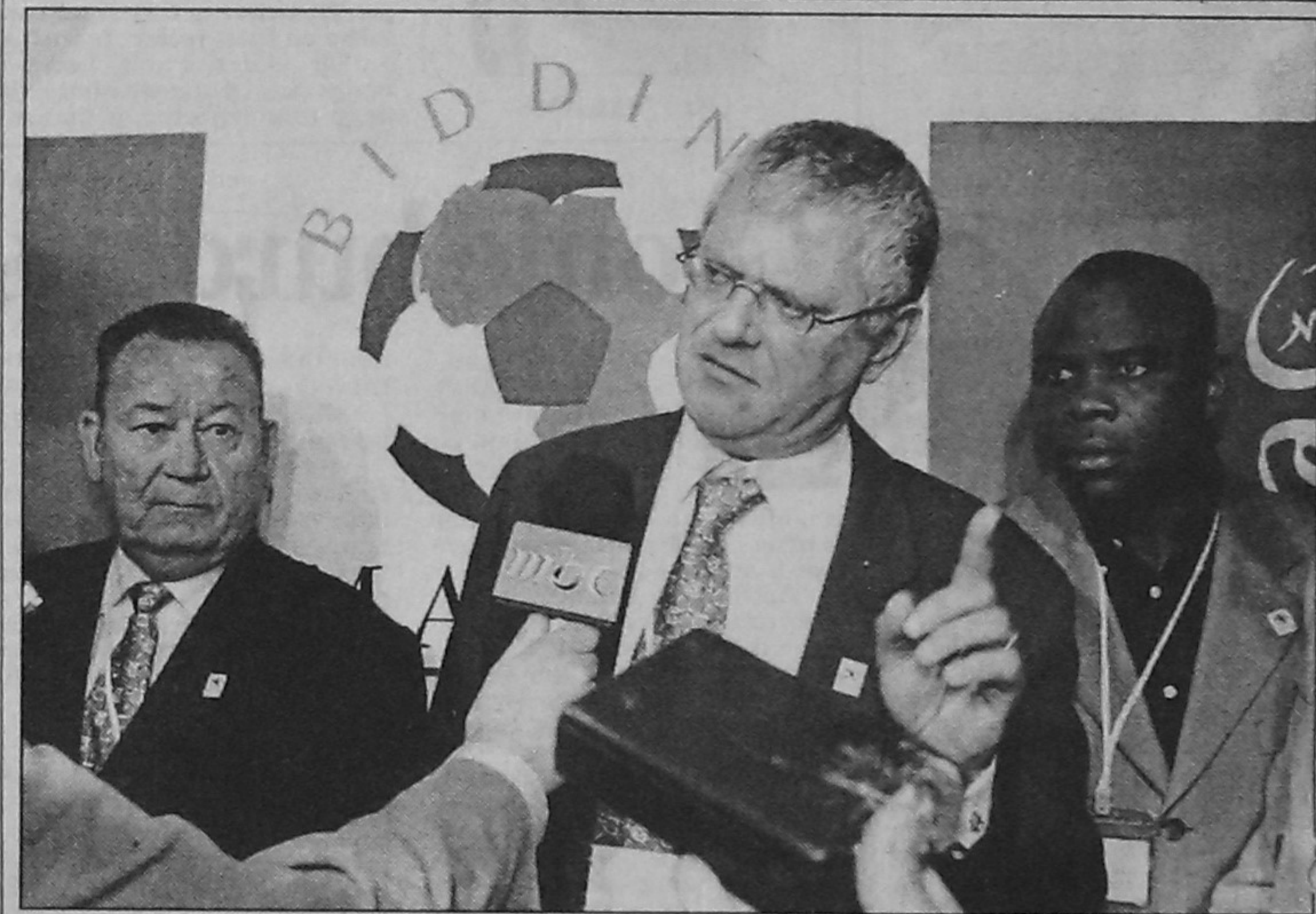
There have already been unofficial talks about trying to unseat Blatter in 2002 between Africa, Europe and Asia.

There have been reports that South Korea's powerful FIFA vice president Chung Mong-Joon will stand.

Chung does not deny he is considering such a move but what happens here on Thursday will play a major role on his decision.

If Blatter's pro-South African campaign pays off he knows that African Football Confederation (CAF) president Issa Hayatou, who campaigned for Johansson against Blatter two years ago, will not be able to mount an African campaign to support Chung.

If Blatter fails to carry the executive committee with him and bring the World Cup to the African continent for the first time, his determination to retain the leadership in two years' time will be severely tested.



Morocco's head of 2006 World Cup bidding committee chief Driss Benhima (C) talking to reporters at Zurich yesterday. —AFP photo

Zoff won't have second thoughts



ROME, July 5: Dino Zoff confirmed Wednesday that he was sticking by his decision to quit as Italy coach.

The 58-year-old reaffirmed his resignation following a meeting with Italian Football Federation president Luciano Nizzola here on Wednesday morning.

Zoff, who won the World Cup with Italy as goalkeeper in 1982, said Nizzola had "done his best" to change his mind but he would not budge. "I'm sticking by my decision. I'll take the consequences," he said.

The former Lazio boss resigned Tuesday saying he was insulted by a scathing attack from AC Milan president and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi over his tactics in the Euro 2000 final against France.

Italy lost 2-1 following a Golden Goal by France in Rotterdam Sunday.

"It was an excessive decision," said Nizzola, who had hoped to convince Zoff to stay in charge of the Squadra Azzurra.

"Today I still thought that Zoff would stay on. For me it's not natural for someone to throw in the towel because of criticism from a political leader," Nizzola told a press conference.

have made mistakes," said Nizzola, adding that a decision on a successor would be taken shortly.

Zoff had been the subject of a great deal of criticism going into the tournament, but won many over as the Azzurri marched into the latter stages with three wins from their three group matches.

Zoff, with 112 caps for the national side, had held the position since Italy's elimination from the 1998 World Cup by France.

FACTFILE

ROME, July 5: Factfile on Dino Zoff after his resignation as Italy coach Tuesday:

Born: February 28, 1942 at Mariano del Friuli

Playing career: Udinese (1961-1963), Mantova (1963-1967), Napoli (1967-1972), Juventus (1972-1983)

Honours: World Cup (1982), European Nations Cup (1968), League championship titles (1973, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1981, 1982), Italian Cup (1979, 1983), UEFA Cup (1977), 112 caps (Italian record)

Coaching record: Juventus Turin (1988-90), Lazio (1990-94 and 1997)

Coaching honours: UEFA Cup and Italian Cup (1990), Italian Cup with Lazio (1994-98)

President: Lazio (1994-98)

National coach: Olympic team (1986-88), Italian national team (August 1998-July 4 2000)

Honours: Euro 2000 runners-up

However, he had come under fire following his side's defensive approach in the semi-final, in which they beat Holland on penalties, and a similar style of play in Rotterdam.

Berlusconi had said that Zoff, in not arranging a man-marker for Zinedine Zidane, had behaved like "the last of the amateurs."

Zoff, with 112 caps for the national side, had held the position since Italy's elimination from the 1998 World Cup by France.

Sanz seeks re-election as president

MADRID, July 5: Real Madrid president Lorenzo Sanz is seeking re-election for the top job with the European champions on July 16, the club announced Wednesday, reports AFP.

Only two candidates are contesting the position - Sanz, who led the team to two Champions League titles in three years and Florentino Perez, who failed in his previous presidential bid in 1996.

The poll will be open to 82,269 registered club members and will take place at Ciudad Deportiva, Madrid at 19h00 GMT.