

OFC's role creates confusion



AUCKLAND, July 11: New Zealand football official Charlie Dempsey received the support of Tonga and Samoa on Tuesday for turning his back on South Africa's 2006 World Cup bid, but other Oceania countries denied claims they approved his decision. Ropati Enosa, secretary of the Samoa Soccer Federation, said he supported Dempsey, the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) president, who abstained from the vote which allowed Germany to win the race for the World Cup by one vote, reports AFP.

"The president used his discretion to choose what was best for the organisation," Enosa said from Apia. By abstaining in response to attempted bribes and threats he claimed Dempsey had ensured Oceania's reputation.

Alongside Fusi Malohi, the Tongan OFC member, said Dempsey had been treated unfairly as the majority of confederation members had backed his decision to abstain.

Confederation secretary-general Josephine King - Dempsey's daughter - says she told

Dempsey before the vote that six of the 11 OFC members agreed that he should vote as he saw fit. Fusi Malohi confirmed Tuesday that Tonga was one of the countries that agreed to give Dempsey a free vote. He told National Radio he understood the other countries were American Samoa, Samoa, Cook Islands, Australia and New Zealand.

Fusi Malohi said the six members had given Dempsey a free vote during a teleconference call before the FIFA ballot was taken last Thursday.

"I think Dempsey has been unfairly treated and I think his actions were justified, because it was us, the executive committee, that changed its earlier decision in Apia to opt for South Africa and instead allowed Dempsey the freedom of choice," he said.

However, Australia, the Cook Islands and New Zealand have all denied changing their stance.

New Zealand Soccer chief executive Bill MacGowan said Fusi Malohi's comments were a surprise.

"Everyone has been contacted

and everyone has confirmed they supported the status quo," MacGowan said.

MacGowan said King rang Oceania members individually, asking them to give Dempsey a free vote, which was inappropriate.

"New Zealand delegate Mark Burgess was adamant that our position hadn't changed. He has witnesses to back up his position, he actually took the call in his car."

However, Dempsey believes his decision to align with Europe's eight members and Asia's four, who were understood to have voted for Germany, had helped Oceania win support for a direct entry to the 2006 World Cup.

Dempsey was scheduled to return to Zurich in August for another FIFA executive committee meeting when he will plead Oceania's bid for a direct qualifier for future World Cup tournaments.

"I was concerned only in the best interests of the OFC. There are still many hurdles to be jumped including direct (World Cup) entry," he said.

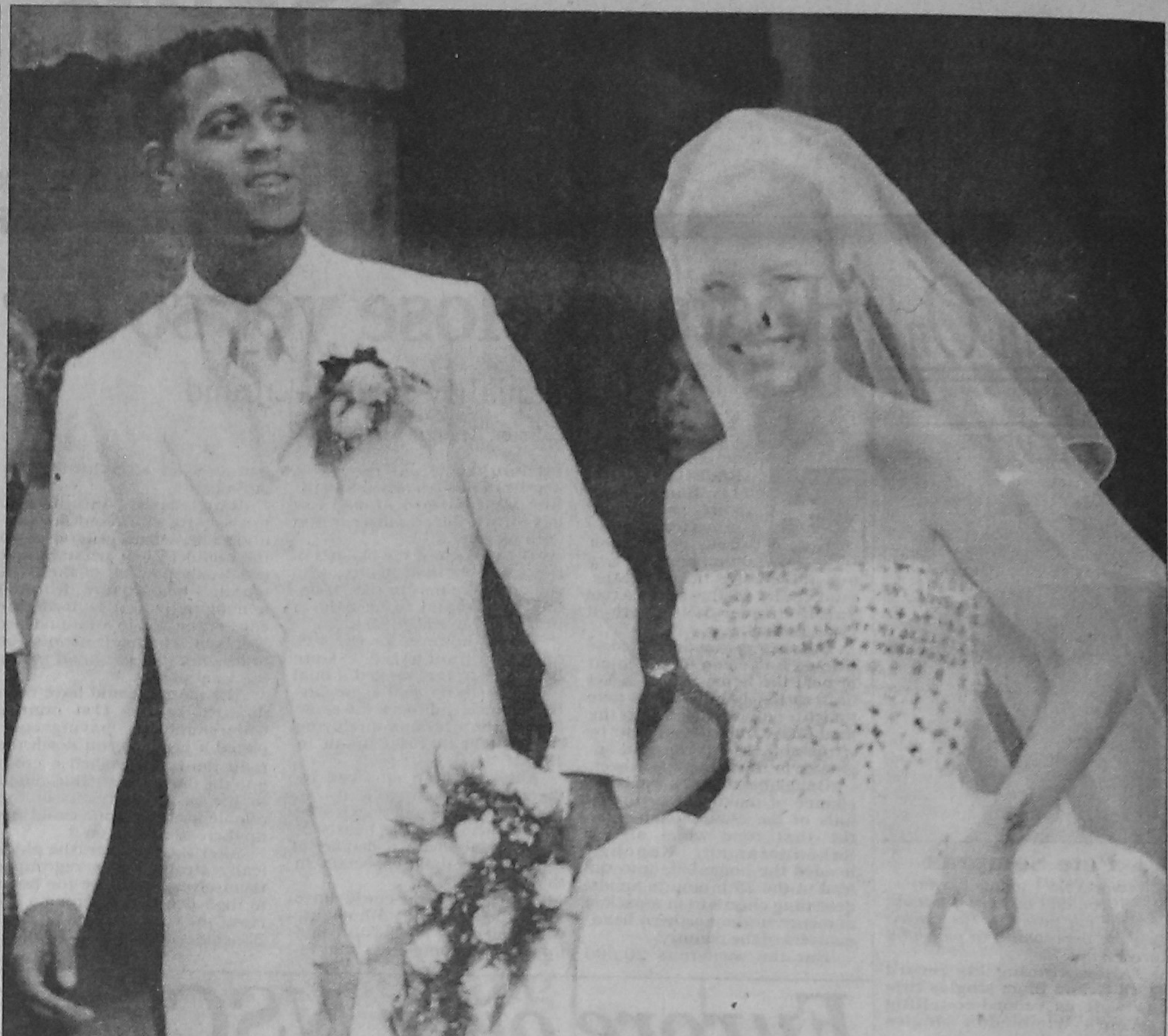
Despite the furor, South African president Thabo Mbeki appears to hold no grudges against the New Zealand government, telling Prime Minister Helen Clark he was sure she was as surprised as he was at Dempsey's decision.

"I am certain that you were as surprised and distressed at Mr. Dempsey's extraordinary decision to abstain in the last round of voting as we, the rest of our continent and other parts of the world are and will continue to be," he said in a letter, dated July 7 and released to the media Tuesday.

Mbeki said the "sense of incredulous disappointment" among South Africans over Dempsey's decision was palpable and that long-term damage had been inflicted on the sport.

"The Zurich decision communicates the message to us that the concept of human solidarity is foreign to some of those who are powerful," he said.

"At some point, the agony of millions must surely come to an end. Time will tell who will act with Africa's people to achieve this result."



ALL THE BEST: Dutch football superstar Patrick Kluijver and his bride Angela leaving the church after their wedding ceremony at Westerkerk in Amsterdam on July 8. -Internet photo

Blatter understands Dempsey



ZURICH, Switzerland, July 11: Charles Dempsey was perfectly entitled to abstain in last week's 2006 World Cup vote, according to FIFA president Sepp Blatter, reports AFP.

The New Zealander's decision not to support South Africa in the final vote cost them the chance to host the event and has caused controversy around the world - not least among his own Oceania confederation members, whose views he is said to have disregarded.

But Blatter told AFP on Tuesday: "Mr Dempsey had the right to abstain, even though I regret the fact that he did. Instead of shouting it from the rooftops that he abstained, he could at least have gone into the voting booth and spoiled his ballot paper."

And in a dismissive postscript to Dempsey's resignation as Oceania president, Blatter added: "His future does not concern me."

Blatter was known to favour South Africa's candidature and it was both a disappointment and a political setback for the FIFA president when Germany won the vote 12-11, thanks to Dempsey's intervention - or, rather the lack of it.

But he conceded there was no



JOSEPH BLATTER

irregularity in the voting procedure and effectively ruled out a referendum. The vote conformed to FIFA rules and Swiss law, he insisted.

But while he was "satisfied with the result", he admitted to being "very disappointed" on a political level.

"It is the biggest disappointment of my career as an administrator," he said. "We had the chance to make history and we

didn't take it. Europe had a great opportunity to make a grand gesture towards Africa. They didn't do it. But that's also democracy."

Blatter warned that there should be no repeat of the events of last Thursday.

"We now have the evidence that it is time to rotate the World Cup," he said, proposing that it be enshrined in the constitution that the six regional confederations take it in turns to host the world's greatest football spectacle.

"There is a lot of work to be done in the four years before the nomination of the hosts of the 2010 World Cup," he added.

Blatter insisted he had no intention of giving up control of FIFA and would stand for re-election in 2002 during the world football governing body's congress in South Korea.

"I have conceded a goal," he quipped, "now it is up to me to equalise and score a winner!"

He also said that he would not rule out the possibility of FIFA taking legal action against the German satirical magazine Titanic over the hoax faxes it sent to certain members of the Executive Committee, promising gifts in case of a German victory in the vote.

Crespo set to break world record

ROME, July 11: Hernan Crespo, Parma's Argentine international striker, is set to join Italian rivals Lazio for a world record fee of 54 million dollars, reports AFP.

According to the Italian sports press, the clubs reached a verbal agreement on Monday night over the transfer, which will involve Lazio paying 12 million dollars in cash and with Portugal's Sergio Conceicao and Argentinian Mathias Almeyda moving to Parma as makeweights in the deal.

Sergio Conceicao was signed from Portuguese club Porto for 8.8 million dollars last season and after fine performances for his country in the Euro 2000 finals, is currently valued at 18 million dollars.

Lazio have already lined up Dutch international Boudewijn Zenden, currently with Barcelona, as a replacement.

Crespo will be guaranteed an annual salary in the region of three million dollars, the papers claim.

Zidane, Figo out of MU's reach



LONDON, July 11(AFP): Manchester United may be the biggest and richest club in the world, but according to Sir Alex Ferguson they cannot afford the very best players.

The United boss claims the club's wages policy is preventing him from buying top stars like France's Zinedine Zidane and Portugal's Luis Figo.

This is despite the fact that United smashed their pay ceiling last season to give skipper Roy Keane a new contract worth a reported 52,000 pounds a week.

Ferguson is in the market for new players to strengthen his squad, but he claims it is extremely difficult to buy someone of the right quality who fits into the club's wages structure.

A frustrated Ferguson said in the Manchester Evening News: "The only way Manchester United can improve the team is by buying the Zidanes and Figos of this world, in which case it is out of our financial reach."

"We're looking at one or two things, but it's all about money. It's difficult finding players who are good enough for here at our wage level."

"It's something that annoys you at times, but there is nothing you can do about it."

"Who wouldn't want a Zinedine Zidane or a Luis Figo in their team? But we have a fabulous group of players and they should do well next season."

"There are some things we are exploring, but I'm very happy with the squad I have got."

Ferguson's comments will not go down well with United's paymasters and it is not the first time he has bemoaned the club's policy on wages.

In his autobiography he claimed the club's parsimonious attitude over the years had held back the team's development.

In light of this, Inter Milan's reported readiness to bid 31 million pounds (49.6 million dollars) for England midfielder Paul Scholes could be an attractive option.



ZINEDINE ZIDANE



LUIS FIGO

However, United chairman and chief executive Martin Edwards dismissed the claims, saying: "I have not spoken to anybody from Inter Milan. No bid has been made."

Meanwhile, PSV Eindhoven have played down talk of United target Ruud van Nistelrooy returning from injury before the end of the year.

Van Nistelrooy is making good progress following surgery in the United States on his ruptured cruciate ligament.

The injury in April to the PSV striker's right knee scuppered his 18.5 million pound move, which would have been a British record, to Old Trafford.

Although Van Nistelrooy is making good progress, PSV insist the 24-year-old will not be back before March.

PSV spokesman Pedro Salazar-Hewitt said: "He is recovering very well and he's working according to the schedule that he was given in the United States."

"But it's still going to take a long time. It could be at least eight months and we don't want to force anything."

"He's just working according to the plan from the medical staff and I don't think he will be able to come back before March."

Harare stadium banned

HARARE, July 11: Football's world governing body FIFA on Tuesday banned the use of Harare's National Stadium for international games for an indefinite period, after 13 people were crushed to death there on Sunday in a stampede, a Zimbabwe football spokesman said, reports AFP.

"FIFA has banned the use of the national sports stadium," Zimbabwe Football Association ZIFA spokesman Peter Mukuna told AFP.

The ban is for an indefinite period of time until FIFA has completed its own investigations into the tragedy, Mukuna said.

Police fired teargas into the stands after "disgruntled" Zimbabwe fans threw bottles onto the pitch following South Africa's second goal in the World Cup qualifying match.

The victims were trampled to death in the ensuing stampede.

Batistuta to miss qualifier

BUENOS AIRES, July 11: Argentina's Gabriel Batistuta has pulled out of the national squad's World Cup South American zone qualifier against Ecuador Wednesday because of a knee injury, the Argentine Football Federation announced Monday, reports AFP.

The Federation said they had received a fax from the player's Italian club AS Roma stating that he had injured himself during Argentina's World Cup qualifier against Colombia in which the striker scored two goals to secure their 3-1 win on June 29.

Batistuta, who starred for Argentina in the 1994 and 1998 World Cup finals, was also absent from a Roma friendly Saturday because of the knee problem, his agent Settimio Aloisio said.

Aloisio said the Argentine squad doctor was due to examine the player this week in Rome.

Argentina is leading the South American World Cup qualifying table with 12 points after four wins in four games, ahead of Brazil (8 pts) and Uruguay (7).

The fourth spot is being closely fought between Ecuador and Paraguay who are neck and neck on six points.

Police the culprit?

HARARE, July 11: The weekend football crush in Zimbabwe that killed at least 13 could have been avoided if police had not overreacted, officials, survivors and rights organisations said Monday, reports AFP.

"The police reacted far too extensively," said Health Minister Timothy Stamps.

Police turned tear gas on spectators Sunday afternoon when disgruntled Zimbabwe fans threw bottles and cans at the National Stadium pitch protest. South Africa scored its second goal of the World Cup qualifying match.

Panicked fans rushed for the narrow exits, trampling 12 people to death and injuring many others in the worst sports tragedy in the country's history.

A thirteenth victim died in Harare's Parirenyatwa hospital on Monday.

"I do not think the tear gas was necessary... We are going to pay too much alcohol, too much excitement. People go mad," he said.

Fidesi told AFP that alcohol was unusually being advertised over the PA system.

But President Robert Mugabe, in a condolence message, blamed "unnamed members of a planted group that had been taking advantage of a huge crowd to sologaneer and exhibit their symbols."

Witnesses said some spectators chanted the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) slogan and waved open hands - a party symbol.

Former English Premiership star John Fashanu, who has set up a burial fund for the victims, told ZBC television he had seen youths "doing unusual things with their hands."

"Politics and football do not go together," he said.



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Mugabe's ruling Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party squeezed out a narrow victory over the MDC in parliamentary elections last month, after a campaign marred by violence in which at least 33 people - mostly opposition supporters - were killed.

In a statement later Monday, the MDC blamed the police for "politically motivated" actions.

Sunday's tragedy was "yet another flagrant violation of the rights of Zimbabweans," the statement said, adding that it followed state-orchestrated violence being aimed at MDC supporters in working-class Harare suburbs.

Police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena, who early Monday rejected accusations of police heavy-handedness, said an enquiry commission had been set up. The state ZIANA news agency reported.

"While there has already been finger pointing from various quarters - aimed at the police, the complexity of the situation and intertwining events has led to the board of enquiry composed of four senior officials being established," Bvudzijena was quoted as saying.

"Nothing is going to be swept under the carpet," Bvudzijena said, adding that the findings of the board would be made public "soon."

Mugabe visited survivors at Parirenyatwa hospital on Monday afternoon, ZIANA reported.

Meanwhile, the Zimbabwe Football Association expressed its sympathy to victims and relatives after an emergency meeting Monday.

ZIFA is to present a report into the incident on Tuesday.

France to play World Cup co-hosts

SEOUL, July 11: Reigning World Cup and European Championship holders France will play friendlies against South Korea and Japan next year, according to press reports here Tuesday, reports AFP.

Roger Lemerre's squad will use the friendlies in Seoul and Tokyo as part of their preparations for the defence of their World Cup crown in 2002, when the tournament is co-hosted by Japan and South Korea, the English-language Korea Herald reported.

No firm dates for the four had been agreed but Korean officials expect the internationals to take place either in May or June, the paper said.

Kezman Now PSV's

BELGRADE, July 11: Partizan Belgrade's Yugoslav international striker Mateja Kezman has signed a five-year deal with Dutch champions PSV Eindhoven, Tanjug news agency reported Monday, reports AFP.

He will link up at PSV with his former Partizan team-mate Ivica Kralj, the Yugoslav national team goalkeeper.

The fee has not been disclosed. Kezman earned an unwanted place in the headlines during Euro 2000 when he was red carded for a wild tackle just 44 seconds after coming on as a substitute in the 1-0 victory over Norway.

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Anelka doesn't rule it out



PARIS, July 11: Real Madrid's French international striker Nicolas Anelka denied Monday that he had signed an agreement to return to his former club Paris St Germain - but hinted that that could change by next week, reports AFP.

Anelka, speaking on his own website, denied reports in L'Equipe newspaper that he had agreed a move.

"I am still at Real until the new board comes in (Real are currently holding elections)," said Anelka. "I am not going to tell you that there have been no discussions as I have never hidden the fact that PSG have always been my club. But I repeat to you: nothing, absolutely nothing has been signed."

But the former Arsenal man added: "And nothing will be decided before next Monday."



NICOLAS ANELKA

Tuesday or Wednesday and I swear to you that you will be the first to know."

Reports that a deal had been

struck were earlier Monday firmly denied by the player's brother.

Didier Anelka, who also acts as his agent, dismissed the report as "rubbish."

"I don't even want to comment, there is nothing to say, it's just rubbish," he told AFP.

According to the report in L'Equipe, Real's outgoing chairman Lorenzo Sanz was in favour of letting the 21-year-old striker leave the Spanish club in a deal worth in the region of 30 million dollars.

But the transfer would depend on Sanz being re-elected chairman next Sunday when he faces competition in a club ballot from Florentino Perez.

PSG would neither confirm or deny the story, saying: "We are working towards a transfer but there will be no decision before next Sunday's election."



A file photo of Yugoslav international striker Mateja Kezman who has joined Dutch champions PSV Eindhoven from Partizan Belgrade.

Reliving the terror

HARARE, July 11(AFP): What was supposed to be a happy Sunday football outing turned into a nightmare for Alec Fidesi, who saw his six-year-old son trampled to death by crowds stampeding out of Harare's National Stadium.

Grieving for Dean outside his funeral parlour, Fidesi was just one of the shocked survivors to recount on Monday the horror of the panic stampede out of the stadium after police fired teargas at the crowds and onto the pitch.

At least 13 people died in the ensuing crush and many more were injured, including Fidesi's wife, in Zimbabwe's worst sports tragedy ever.

Fidesi said police fired teargas at fans departing in frustration after South Africa scored its second goal in the World Cup qualifying match against Zimbabwe.

"As we were going out a teargas canister was fired towards us," Fidesi told AFP.

"I shouted at the police telling them to stop firing teargas as we had children with us," he said.

But the police continued to fire and "there was pandemonium, and people started throwing bottles," Fidesi said. Other reports suggested the trouble began when fans threw bottles and heavy-handed police reacted with teargas.

Fidesi maintained that the



police were upset that people were leaving the stadium before the game was over.

Fidesi's wife was holding Dean but fell to the ground as the crowd swelled behind them.

Fidesi handed over his four-year-old daughter to a man he did not know and rushed back to retrieve his son.

He carried the boy not knowing whether he was dead or alive and left him at the back of the stadium, then rushed back for his unconscious wife.

Dean was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital, where his wife remained on Monday.

Fidesi blamed the police for the tragedy.

"It's the ZRP (Zimbabwe Republic Police) to blame because they were not provoked, and if they had left people to leave the stadium without firing teargas, nothing would have happened."

"It's the ZRP, without instructions and, with their illiteracy" who were responsible, Fidesi said, as he waited outside the funeral home to take his son's body.

Meanwhile, nursing a broken tibia in his hospital bed, Charles Mashaya told of his miraculous escape from death after he was trapped under a sea of fleeing fans for up to 15 minutes.

The force of the crowd pushed him from the top of the terraces, where he had been watching the match, to the bottom, where crowds fell on top of him, ZBC television reported.

"For 10 or 15 minutes I was trapped under people. There must have been a heap of people going as high as one metre," Mashaya said.

He said the nearest exit was blocked and people were unable to get out.

"To try and stop people from continuing to come down the terraces, someone used the water from the firefighter."