

Charlton for British

LONDON, Oct 10: Sir Bobby Charlton, perhaps the most respected figure in English soccer, says it would be a "disgrace" to appoint a foreigner as coach of the national team, reports AP.

Ever since Kevin Keegan resigned as coach following England's 1-0 defeat to Germany in a World Cup qualifier Saturday at Wembley, speculation has focused on the possibility of naming a non-Englishman as his successor.

Among the names mentioned have been France's Arsene Wenger, Italy's Marcello Lippi and Dutchman Dick Advocaat.

But Charlton, the former Manchester United star and a hero of England's 1966 World Cup winning team, says the Football Association should never consider a foreign coach.

"It would be an insult to our national pride," he said in an interview in the Daily Mail. "What a disgrace if the country which invented the game - and in which football is the greatest sporting passion - couldn't find someone good enough to manage our national team."

"If we want to consider ourselves still one of the leading football countries in the world, then we should not even consider putting a foreigner in charge."

"Only the emerging countries or smaller nations to that. Playing for, or managing England involves more than just technical expertise. It is a huge honour to lead your country and it can never mean as much to someone who is not English."

FA chief executive Adam Crozier has questioned the capabilities of the current crop of English coaches.

It doesn't matter whether the new man is English, Scottish, Irish or foreign, he said. "All that matters is that they are the right person for the long term future of the England team."

A poll in the Daily Mirror suggested 81 per cent of those surveyed do not want the FA to turn to a foreigner.

"Our position has not changed - we rule nothing out and we rule nothing in," FA spokesman Adrian Bevington said Tuesday. "We begin our work for the long term on Thursday."

'The Eel' in news again

LONDON, Oct 10: Unlikely Olympic hero Eric "the Eel" Moussambani found himself at the centre of a diplomatic dispute Tuesday when the president of Equatorial Guinea refused to let the swimmer travel to a British awards ceremony, reports AP.

President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo wanted Moussambani to attend a reception for the nation's Olympic athletes that conflicted with Tuesday night's National Television Awards, where he is slated to hand out an award.

Moussambani said upon his arrival in London that the president ordered his plane grounded before it left for neighbouring Cameroon.

After an hour on the tarmac, British High Commissioner George Boon convinced the president that the swimmer's appearance at the awards would raise the small west African nation's profile.

"He has delayed the reception until the end of the week," Moussambani said. "I'm very excited, I would never have dreamed of being able to come to London."

The 22-year-old student became an international celebrity at Sydney 2000 after needing almost two minutes to complete the 100 freestyle. He never put his head underwater and virtually came to a stop with 10 meters to go before finally making it to the wall.

Hamed gives up WBO belt

SHEFFIELD, England, Oct 10: Prince Naseem Hamed, widely regarded as the world's top featherweight, has relinquished his WBO title in a dispute over a mandatory defence, reports AP.

The undefeated Hamed, who has held the title since 1995, refused to fight No. 1 contender Isivan "Koko" Kovacs. The fight was due to take place in England on November 4.

HBO, the American cable television network, which screens Hamed's fights, said it wasn't satisfied with Kovacs' credentials and was offering Hamed only a fraction of his usual purse.

Kovacs is now likely to be matched against Mexico's Marco Antonio Barrera for the vacant title, with Hamed to face the winner.

In his most recent fight, Hamed retained the WBO title by stopping Augie Sanchez in the fourth round in Mosliman-tucket, Conn. on August 19. Hamed is 35-0, with 31 KOs.

Boxing fans have been clamoring for Hamed to fight either Barrera or Erik Morales, both super bantamweights.

Hamed's brother and business manager, Riath, sent a letter to WBO president Francisco Valcarlos informing him of the decision to give up the belt.

"Naseem is unable to fulfill his mandatory obligation due to HBO's no opponent," he wrote.

"In order to maintain the excellent relationship that we have enjoyed for the last five years, I would like to notify you of Naseem's decision to vacate the title."



Newly-appointed England captain Martin Keown talking to reporters during a media conference in Helsinki on October 9 ahead of the World Cup against Finland. To his left is acting England manager Howard Wilkinson. —AFP photo

England can expect no Finnish favours



PARIS, Oct 10 (AFP) - Scandinavian nights are already drawing in and World Cup action in a Helsinki on the cusp of winter is not a place for the faint-hearted.

But that is England's fate as the country which invented the world game must battle to save a campaign for the 2002 finals which has already descended into farce with Saturday's opening defeat at Wembley by Germany.

That bitter loss, bringing down the final curtain at the old stadium, resulted in the resignation of coach Kevin Keegan, whose frank appraisal was that the job was beyond his tactical capabilities.

England are now essentially rudderless as they bid to pick up the pieces.

Keegan's assistant Howard Wilkinson has the thankless task of turning the ship around against Finland on Wednesday night and may even be in for the duration after several potential successors to Keegan ruled themselves out of the job on Monday.

Former England skipper Bryan Robson said he wanted more experience with Middlesbrough before throwing his hat into the ring while Peter Taylor of Leicester and French World Cup-winning coach Aimé Jacquet also ruled themselves out of contention, as did Sunderland's Peter Reid.

FA executive director David Davies maintains the post is coveted by the majority of modern managers.

But they are not exactly queuing up to take the hot seat, seen as an "impossible" challenge.

Even if the FA do go down the route of appointing a foreigner, even that could see a narrow choice as Arsenal said their Arsene Wenger would have to be "crazy" to do it, though they revealed he will be given permission to speak to England officials.

Robson spoke for what an increasingly less silent majority when he came out in favour of former coach Terry Venables to replace Keegan, having worked

alongside him in the run-up to Euro 96.

"I said when I worked with him that Terry Venables was the best coach I had ever worked with," said Robson.

"For me, he's the man for the job."

But England now have to take a step into the unknown in the knowledge that sections of the FA are not in favour of Venables, who stepped down four years ago when embroiled in a legal battle with former boss and Tottenham Hotspur chairman Alan Sugar.

Nonetheless, he has the vote of British bookies, who have installed Venables as their 4/1 favourite.

England's gloom deepened earlier Monday when skipper Tony Adams and defender Graeme Le Saux were both ruled out of the Finland clash.

Arsenal centre-back Adams injured his back in a training session at Bisham Abbey while Le Saux was already struggling to be fit after receiving a kick during the Germany match.

Wilkinson had already lost Liverpool midfielder Steven Gerrard (groin) and Manchester United winger David Beckham (knee) - though he has called in striker Teddy Sheringham, in fine form for Manchester United.

Adams' withdrawal along with that of Beckham leaves Wilkinson with a captaincy headache as second-in-command Sol Campbell is already missing from the squad.

Curiously, England's Group Nine rivals Germany, runaway favourites to win the group following last Saturday's Wembley win, have a coaching conundrum of their own as Rudi Voller insists he will be stepping aside next summer for Bayer Leverkusen boss Christoph Daum.

Daum is mired in controversy as he tried to counter allegations of drug taking, involvement with prostitutes and financial impropriety.

But he has the support of German legend and Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer as well as caretaker coach Voller, who has led the national team to three wins in three outings.

Finland want to prove the adage that there are no easy fixtures at international level any more and have three secret weapons in their squad who know all about the British game.

Their most potent weapon is Jonatan Johansson, who has scored five times in the Premiership for Charlton this season, while Sami Hyypia marshals the defence just as he does at Liverpool, who have made him their skipper.

The other British-based Finn is Hearts keeper Antti Nieminen, who as an adopted Scot will be only too pleased if he can keep out the Auld Enemy.

Partnering Johansson should be Barcelona misfit Jari Litmanen, who has failed to establish himself at the Nou Camp but who conquered Europe while with Ajax.

Finnish coach Antti Muurinen says his team must be ready to face an English backlash post-Keegan.

"It won't make it any easier for us now he's gone. Maybe losing him will motivate the team," said Muurinen, whose side lost 1-0 in Greece at the weekend.

In Wednesday's other Group Nine match Albania host Greece in Tirana.

In Group Two, Ireland, buoyed by away draws at both Portugal and Holland, play Estonia in Dublin.

The Dutch will meanwhile face Portugal in Rotterdam.

Other midweek matches see Russia host Luxembourg in Group One while early leaders Slovenia take on Switzerland.

Group Three favourites Czech Republic travel to Malta while Northern Ireland look to follow up their weekend draw against Denmark with a win away to Iceland.

Group pace-setters Slovakia host Sweden in Bratislava while Poland can make it three wins out of three in Group Five if they beat Wales in Warsaw.

Scotland, with two wins under their belts, have a tough challenge as they travel to Croatia in Group Six.

Spain visit Austria in Group Seven while the pick of Group Eight ties sees Italy host Georgia.

Keown named skipper



LONDON, Oct 10: England caretaker coach Howard Wilkinson moved to appoint Arsenal's Martin Keown as skipper and called up Manchester United defender Wes Brown into the senior side on Monday ahead of Wednesday's World Cup qualifier in Finland, reports AFP.

Wilkinson, desperate to lift morale in the wake of Kevin Keegan's resignation which followed Saturday's home defeat by Germany, has also called on United's veteran striker Teddy Sheringham.

Keown earlier stressed the need for the squad to pull together as they bid to put their

Dutruel grateful

BARCELONA, Oct 10: France's Richard Dutruel told the Spanish press on Monday he owed his "dream" selection by France to Barcelona for putting him in the shop window, reports AFP.

The 27-year-old keeper said: "I'm the same as I was two years ago but it's true that Barcelona has put me in the shop window a lot more than when I was at Celta Vigo."

Dutruel, a former Paris Saint Germain and Caen player who was also at Vigo from 1996 to 2000, earned his first ever French cap last Wednesday in a friendly international against Cameroon at the Stade de France.

German nightmare behind them in Helsinki.

Wilkinson handed Keown the captaincy for the first time after skipper Tony Adams and vice-captain David Beckham were both forced to pull out of the squad through injury in the last 24 hours.

The Arsenal central defender insisted the players had lost a "special friend" with Keegan's departure but insisted everyone must now look forward and start to repair the damage after Saturday's 1-0 defeat by Germany at Wembley.

Keown said: "I'm very proud to be given the opportunity to captain my country - but very quickly we've got to get on with the job of rescuing a very bad start to our World Cup campaign."

"It will be a tough match and Finland feel it is a game they can win so we have to pull together very quickly as a group and take things forward. As the captain I hope I can form a link between the players and staff and lead from the front on the pitch."

"We've got a real task ahead of us but there are still plenty of points to be won and that's what we're going for."

Keown admitted that Keegan's departure had not come as a great surprise given his past record of making spur of the moment decisions such as when he quit Newcastle.

He said: "There was no real indication that he was going in the build up to this match and he was very positive as he has been throughout with us."

"But we knew that in the

past he has made decisions when emotional so you have to say it wasn't so much of a shock from that point of view."

Wilkinson explained his decision to give Keown the skipper's armband, telling reporters: "Martin Keown has really established himself now in everyone's eyes and his qualities are very similar to Stuart Pearce. He has got the qualities we need, that every team needs particularly at times like this."

Petit's cause for concern

PARIS, Oct 10: French World Cup winner Emmanuel Petit has spoken of his concerns that doping threatens to become a problem in professional football, reports AFP.

Speaking to French daily Le Parisien, Petit, who left Arsenal for Barcelona in the summer, said: "I don't want to see drugs becoming commonplace in my sport, but unfortunately that's the way we are heading."

Petit said he believed the increasing number of matches were forcing clubs to think of taking drastic measures to get players fit quickly after injury.

"I've not had a break in two months. No athlete in the world can produce top-drawer performances every three days," said Petit.

His international team-mate, Chelsea defender Frank Leboeuf, agreed that the pressures on modern day players were excessive.

QUALIFYING FIXTURES

PARIS, Oct 10 (AFP) - Schedule and kick-off times for 2002 World Cup qualifying matches on Wednesday, October 11 (times GMT):

Group 1
Moscow
Russia v Luxembourg (1500)
Ljubljana
Slovenia v Switzerland (1815)

Group 2
Dublin
Ireland v Estonia (1830)
Rotterdam
Holland v Portugal (1830)

Group 3
Valletta
Malta v Czech Republic (1600)
Copenhagen
Denmark v Bulgaria (1715)
Reykjavik (1930)
Iceland v Northern Ireland (1930)

Group 4
Baku
Azerbaijan v Turkey (1500)
Chisinau
Moldova v Macedonia (1700)
Bratislava
Slovakia v Sweden (1815)

Group 5
Minsk
Belarus v Armenia (1500)
Oslo
Norway v Ukraine (1700)
Warsaw
Poland v Wales (1800)

Group 6
Zagreb
Croatia v Scotland (1700)

Group 7
Tel Aviv
Israel v Bosnia-Herzegovina (1815)
Vienna
Austria v Spain (1830)

Group 8
Kaunas
Lithuania v Hungary (1830)
Ankara
Italy v Georgia (1845)

Group 9
Helsinki
Finland v England (1600)
Tirana
Albania v Greece (1800)

Vieri back on track

MILAN, Oct 10: Inter Milan striker Christian Vieri scored two goals in a training match Monday as he eased back into action after the long injury lay-off that caused him to miss Euro 2000, reports AFP.

Vieri, who was the world's most expensive player when he moved from Lazio to Inter for 49 million dollars, is now on track to return to Serie A action on November 1.

The former Juventus and Atletico Madrid player came through his workout unscathed under the watchful eye of stand-in coaches Narciso Pezzotti and Beppe Baresi who will hand over control to Marco Tardelli on Wednesday.

Vieri and his team-mates played at Inter's youth base Intero as their usual Appiano Gentile headquarters are currently occupied by the Italian national team.

Meanwhile, the news that Tardelli is the new man in charge of the nerazzuri (black and blues) has met with approval from fans and players alike.

Andrea Pirlo, who played under the 1982 World Cup hero in Italy's team at the Sydney Olympics, said: "He is a great coach. He can build a team."

Thai boxing star in hot water

BANGKOK, Oct 10: A local bank has sued Thailand's first Olympic gold medalist for defaulting on his credit card payments worth more than 100,000 baht (2,380 USD), a bank official said Tuesday, reports AP.

The Siam Commercial Bank filed the suit on Monday in a Bangkok district court against Somluck Khaming, 27, Thailand's star at the 1996 Atlanta Games where he won the featherweight kick boxing gold. It was Thailand's first Olympic gold.

"We understand that he might have faced a liquidity problem. But if he pays as the court will order, he will be cleared," the bank's credit officer told the news agency. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

Somluck, an officer in the Royal Thai Navy, did not win any medal at the Sydney Games.

He was not available for comment but his wife, Ooy, contacted by telephone, told "Everything seems to have gone down for us since my husband did not win any medal in Sydney. Too many bad things have happened and we have not talked about this lawsuit."

She said her husband faced a number of other unpaid debts also. She did not elaborate.

The Siam Commercial Bank official said Somluck owed the bank about 101,560 baht (2,418 USD). He did not elaborate. But a Nation newspaper said Somluck had failed to pay 81,435 baht (1,938 dollars) he had charged to his credit card in June 1999. The amount incurred about 20,000 baht (476 dollars) in interest by Aug 9 this year.

The official said Somluck faced a number of other lawsuits over his unpaid debts and loans from leasing companies, banks and other creditors.

It was not clear why he didn't repay his debt using the money he earned before the Sydney Games. The Nation said the opposition Thai Rak Thai party leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, gave him 100,000 baht (2,380 dollars) and Sakchai Wongmalasiddhi, chairman of the National Archery Association of Thailand, gave him another 100,000 baht (2,380 dollars).

Italy are in top gear



ANCONA, Italy, Oct 10: Buoyant Italy go into Wednesday's World Cup Group Eight qualifier with Georgia here in fine fettle after Saturday's 3-0 victory over Romania at Milan's San Siro Stadium, reports AFP.

These are heady days for Italian sport with an impressive gold medal haul at the Sydney Olympics and with Michael Schumacher winning Ferrari's first Formula One Championship in 21 years.

Italy boss Giovanni Trapattoni was also gratefully accepting the bouquets after the brilliant display in Milan but one man who might be forgiven for not joining in the party mood is Alessandro Del Piero who is rapidly beginning to look like a misfit under Trapattoni's new regime.

Del Piero started on the bench at the San Siro and had to watch Trapattoni's front three of Filippo Inzaghi, Marco Delvecchio and Francesco Totti rattle in a goal each as Italy flattened Romania in a first-half blitz.

Totti, playing behind Inzaghi

and Delvecchio, is now the undisputed leader of the Italian team and that leaves Del Piero's long term place looking vulnerable although Trapattoni made a point of saying: "He (Del Piero) works hard and sooner or later we will need everyone."

Juventus ace Del Piero made a second-half appearance as a substitute but the match was as good as over and the news that his clubmate Inzaghi and AS Roma duo Delvecchio and Totti are all in tip-top condition has all but ended Del Piero's hopes of making the starting line-up in Ancona.

Del Piero's undoubted class at club level has never fully translated to the international scene and three times he has failed to rise to the occasion when it mattered - in Euro 96, the 1998 World Cup and most notably in Euro 2000 when he missed two glorious chances to kill the final with eventual winners France when Italy were leading 1-0.

Trapattoni is an experienced campaigner and warned his troops not to get overconfident. "I am very happy with the performance at the San Siro," said the former AC Milan. Ju-

ventus, Inter Milan, Bayern Munich and Fiorentina coach.

"But compliments are dangerous. It is better if we remain prudent especially since Georgia hammered Lithuania 4-0 (at Vilnius). That should make us reflect that Georgia instead of Romania could be our principal rivals for the top spot in the Group."

Defender Alessandro Nesta echoed that view, saying: "Georgia are a much stronger side than Romania."

While he is unlikely to tinker with his front players Trapattoni has two concerns in defender Fabio Cannavaro and Francesco Coco, who had a successful debut against Romania.

Neither trained normally Monday at the Inter Milan training base of Appiano Gentile currently requisitioned by the national side and Giuseppe Pancaro and Valerio Bertotto stand by if needed.

Georgia arrived in Ancona on Monday and will be looking to their chief creators Georgi Kinkladze and Temuri Ketsbaia to continue in the same vein after their stirring performances against Lithuania.



China's football coach Bora Milutinovic (R) trying to draw the attention of his players to something during a practice session at the Tripoli Stadium in Beirut yesterday. The team is currently in Lebanon to participate in the Asian Cup which begins tomorrow. —AFP photo

Reassuring Velappan



BEIRUT, Oct 10: Asian football chief Peter Velappan played down security fears surrounding the Asian Cup here Monday, saying he was confident the simmering Middle East crisis would not affect the tournament, reports AFP.

"At the moment we are simply focused on the successful staging of the Asian Cup in accordance with the schedule," said Velappan, speaking ahead of the tournament's kick-off on Thursday.

"Of course, we are also watching very carefully the political situation."

However, the authorities have assured us there is nothing to worry about, and we are happy to accept the word of the Lebanese authorities on this matter," said Velappan, general secretary of the Asian Football Confederation.

Velappan, who is also the tournament's director, was speaking a day after Israeli warplanes broke the sound



PETER VELAPPAN

barrier over Beirut and southern Lebanon for the first time since troops withdrew in May.

The flyover fuelled fears of an Israeli backlash against Lebanon after Hezbollah guerrillas captured three Israeli soldiers on Saturday night.

The heightened tension has also called into question Lebanon's hosting of the Asian Cup, the continent's showcase football tournament.

Velappan said representatives and team officials from the 12 nations taking part would be given security reassurances at a briefing on Tuesday.

"We will have a meeting on Tuesday with the team delegation heads, purely to brief them and reassure them that there is nothing to worry about," Velappan said.

Velappan's comments mirrored remarks made earlier by Asian Cup organising committee chief Assad Taqi.

Taqi, a vice-president of the AFC, said officials were confident the tournament would be staged as planned.

He said there would be no disruption to the tournament schedule in the event of any damage to stadiums caused by possible Israeli military action in Lebanon.

"If any stadium is damaged we can play all the games in one stadium," he said. The Asian Cup will be played at three venues across Lebanon, in Beirut, Tripoli and Saida.

Taqi said emergency generators could power floodlights if energy supplies were hit in any Israeli air strikes.

Zaid Khamil, vice-president of the Asian Cup's local Lebanese organising committee, said there had been no indication security fears were scaring fans away.

"I am unaware of anybody cancelling trips to the tournament," he said.

Red Star fined

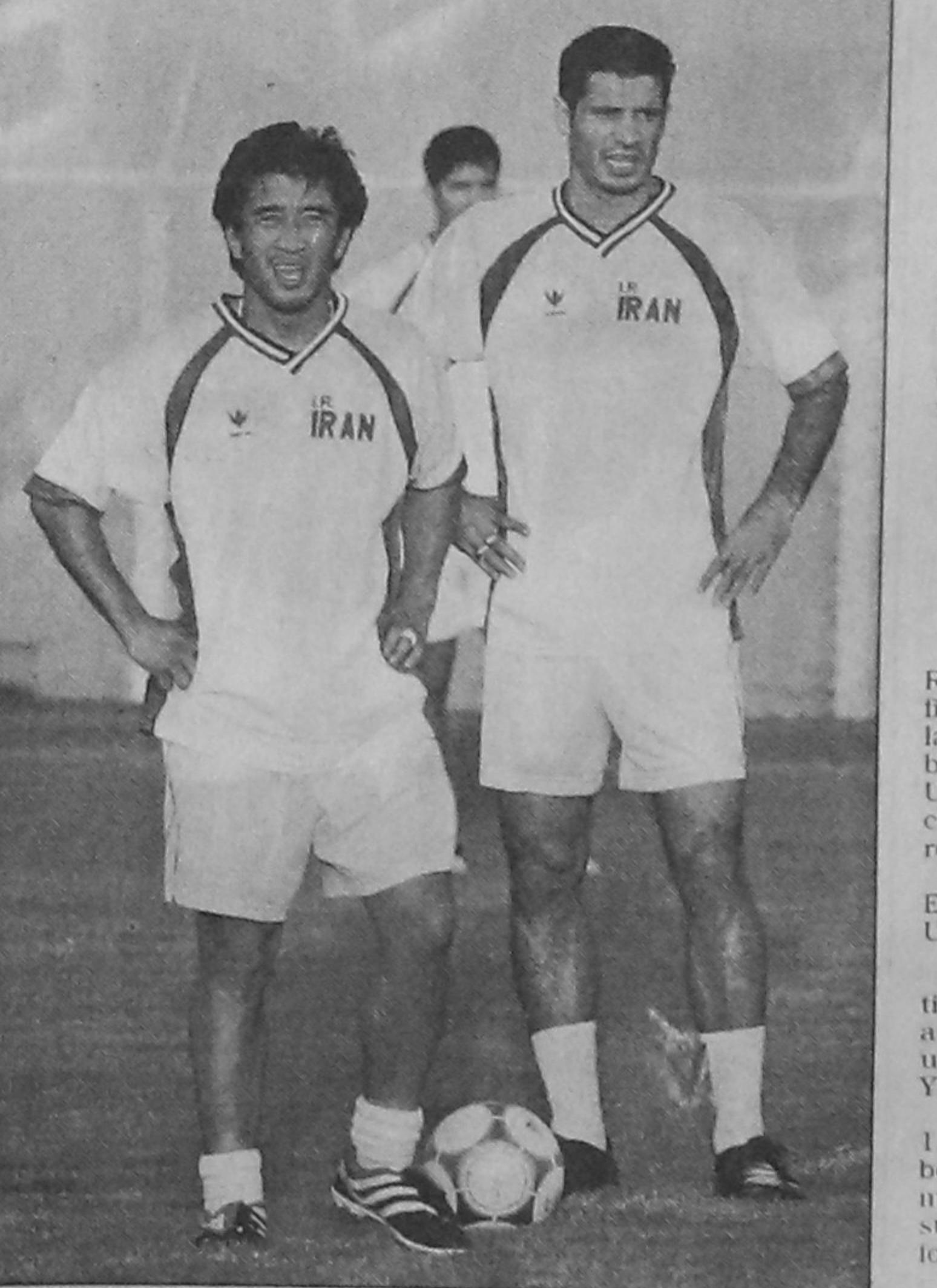
NYON, Switzerland, Oct 10: Red Star Belgrade have been fined 40,000 Swiss francs (dollars 22,560) for their fans' poor behaviour during last month's UEFA Cup clash with English club Leicester City in Vienna, reports Reuters.

The fine was handed out by European governing body UEFA.

The first-round, second leg tie was moved from Belgrade to a neutral venue because of the unstable political situation in Yugoslavia.

Fans were thrown at the 1,500 Leicester fans present before the kick-off. Police had to move in to restore order as the stadium announcer appealed for calm.

Slovak club IFK Kosice were also fined 40,000 francs for crowd trouble after their UEFA Cup clash with Austrian side Graz AK.



DYNAMIC DUO: Iranians Khodadad Azizi (L) and Ali Daei take a break from training in Beirut on October 9. —AFP photo