

Lazio behind Mihajlovic

ROME, Dec 23: Italian champions Lazio said Friday they would take legal action to defend their Yugoslav defender Siniša Mihajlovic from a reported legal investigation for allegedly racist remarks made to an opponent and also to defend the club's reputation, reports AFP.

Corriere della Sera newspaper had reported Friday that Mihajlovic was being investigated for the much-documented spat with Arsenal's French midfielder Patrick Vieira during the 1-1 Champions League match between the clubs in October.

A Lazio statement said the club would contest what it called "a presumed case by the State Police against the footballer Siniša Mihajlovic for the ill-judged remarks made by the same player towards the Arsenal player Vieira during the match between Lazio and Arsenal on October 17."

"It concerns just one of the verbal disputes that happen on a playing field during sporting encounters characterised by exacerbated antagonism and intense emotional tension and without any real intent."

The club statement reiterated that Lazio supported moves to drive racism out of football, adding: "The prominence given to this modest episode seems to be inserted in a more wide context, incriminating the image of the player and the club."

Lawyers have also been instructed to preserve the image of the club.

On Friday, in response to the newspaper claims, Rome magistrates said the case had not yet been assigned to an individual magistrate.

Mihajlovic admitted insulting Vieira and referring to his colour - Vieira was born in Senegal - but denied racism and subsequently was given a two-game ban by European football governing body UEFA.

Mihajlovic subsequently publicly apologised before the Champions League match with Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine and pleaded with the club's supporters to desist from racist chanting.

It is the first time that such an action has been taken in Italian football and if convicted Mihajlovic faces a maximum sentence of three years in jail.

Corriere della Sera said that Italian police were also investigating charges that Mihajlovic had asked some Lazio fans to unfurl a banner at matches in homage to the slain Serbian warlord Arkan.

At an Italian league match on January 30, several days after his assassination, a banner was seen at the Lazio ground which read "In honour of Arkan the Tiger".

At the time of his death Arkan - real name Zeljko Raznatovic - had been indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Mihajlovic, a Serb, was born in the Croatian town of Vukovar that was the scene of the first atrocities of the modern-phase of the Balkans conflict.

FA to follow French model

LONDON, Dec 23: Plans for a 40 million pound (58.8 million dollar) national football centre have been revealed by the English Football Association (FA), reports AFP.

The FA said that the ultra-modern football centre would rival the Clarendon base that has been instrumental in providing the platform for world and European champions France's international success.

The site is still under discussion but it will be in the Midlands, and the FA are confident that building work will begin soon with the centre opening within the next two years.

When completed, the FA would have a state-of-the-art base for all of their international teams, from youth to senior level, which will replace facilities at Lilleshall and Bisham Abbey.

The facilities will include accommodation, indoor and outdoor pitches, medical centre and research base. The FA's coaching structure will also be based at the new centre.

FA chief executive Adam Crozier said: "We now have approval to build a national football centre, our version of Clarendon.

"We have spent a lot of time speaking to not only France about how Clarendon works but a number of big clubs around Europe.

"We have two sites that we're near to completion on and we hope to announce where in January. It will be absolutely state-of-the-art."

Crozier said that such a facility was needed to develop the game in England.

"We need top-class facilities. It's a very important part of the development plans for all the England sides and will probably cost around 30 million to 40 million pounds to build from scratch."

"Part of that will be having the best professionals in every area located there so that all England sides get the best possible help to give us the best possible chance of succeeding."

"If you ask the French, they would say it's been a big part of their success. It's where they run everything from. It's the heartbeat of their activities and the clubs also get a great deal of out of it."



Liverpool superstars Michael Owen (L) and Emile Heskey swap the high-five after the former had scored against Arsenal in their Premiership encounter at Anfield yesterday. —AFP photo

Premiership

Anfield awes Arsenal



LONDON, Dec 23: Gerard Houllier won the battle of the French managers Saturday as Liverpool handed Arsene Wenger's Arsenal a pre-Christmas headache with a 4-0 drubbing at Anfield, reports AFP.

Liverpool's convincing win comes a week after their 1-0 win away against Manchester United and suggests that a return to the glory days of the late 1970s and 1980s might not be too far away for the Merseysiders.

Arsenal remained in second place but Liverpool are just two points adrift and a further three back from leaders Manchester United who were due to play third-placed Ipswich later Saturday.

The home side was straight into their stride - although the London club battled back in an increasingly physical contest.

But it was Liverpool who drew first blood after only 10 minutes to give Houllier a inkling of what was to come later.

Emile Heskey forced Silvinho into conceding a throw, which Markus Babbel launched into the box. Heskey nodded the ball back for Steven Gerrard, and the teenager lashed a fierce

drive from the edge of the box past unsighted goalkeeper Alex Manninger.

Then Michael Owen was stopped in full flow by the linesman's flag after a Nick Barmby touch on, and then failed to connect cleanly with Babbel's cross after the German had run onto an astute ball from Danny Murphy down the line.

Arsenal started the second half in an aggressive fashion. Westerveld having to be alert to push a way a swerving Bergkamp drive.

But Liverpool, having absorbed sustained Arsenal pressure, scored on the counter-attack. Heskey displayed his physical prowess to hold off Keown as he went into the left-hand side of the box.

One dipping Henry drove from just outside the box fizzed over Sander Westerveld's bar before Croatian midfielder Igor Biscan won approval from the Kop for a crunching deflection collision with Vieira which poleaxed the big midfielder.

Vieira's teammate Martin Keown was next to require treatment after he landed awkwardly when he headed out to deprive Heskey.

Jamie Carragher was then booked for a foul on Dennis Bergkamp which caused a minor skirmish, with the Arsenal striker appearing to swing his arm in the direction of the Liverpool player.

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