

## Gremio's bid to hold on to Ronaldinho

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 16: Brazilian club Gremio Porto Alegre announced on Monday they were holding contract talks in a bid to keep young international striker Ronaldinho Gaucho, who was due to sign for French club Paris Saint Germain in the next few days, reports AFP.

"Gremio are negotiating a new contract for Ronaldinho with Roberto (the brother and agent of the player) and his lawyer Sergio Neves," Gremio spokesman Marcio Neves told AFP Monday.

Ronaldinho could now remain in Brazil despite PSG president Laurent Perrier declaring on Friday that a deal to secure the talented forward was "close to completion".

The "official line" from Gremio will come as a shock to PSG, and their fans, who have been waiting to capture the 20-year-old player, tipped as the next Ronaldo, since interest was first made public two months ago.

"The negotiation should be completed by February 15, the date on which his current contract expires. That's the official line from Gremio," he added without revealing details about Ronaldinho's new improved deal.

Ronaldinho came to global football prominence after his displays in the Copa America in 1999 and during last year's Olympic Games in Sydney.

## Football Lizarazu's remedy

BERLIN, Jan 16: France and Bayern Munich defender Bixente Lizarazu, who was threatened by Basque separatist group ETA, says football has been his "true therapy" throughout his harrowing ordeal, according to German newspaper reports, reports AFP.

The World and European champion added that he could not understand the logic of ETA and made a poignant plea to ETA by saying: "I'm only a footballer."

Lizarazu said: "Now it's even more important that I play and that I play well. It's the only real therapy that will allow me to forget this strange situation," Lizarazu told German daily Bild.

Lizarazu, who was born in the French Basque country, received a letter on December 12 at his parents home demanding that he pay a "revolutionary tax for having played for the enemy (France)".

The letter was allegedly sent by ETA, who said that there would be reprisals against his family if he did not comply.

However Lizarazu defied ETA to join Bayern at a Spanish training camp in Marbella, and is keen for football to play a part in his getting back to normality.

"One can only try to understand such events. But it's not easy. It makes you wonder what kind of world we are living in. I'm only a footballer," Lizarazu said from Marbella.

Lizarazu, however, is taking no chances and has constant protection from two bodyguards, and also has the special branch of the Spanish police for constant company.

He is also now aware of the value that football holds for him after his ordeal.

"Football is even more important to me now than before. It gives me the power to think positively. I know that I have to be a little more prudent, but otherwise, only football matters to me."

## Gothenburg after MU's Blomqvist

STOCKHOLM, Jan 16: IFK Gothenburg are interested in taking Manchester United's forgotten man Jesper Blomqvist back to Sweden, reports AFP.

Roger Gustafsson, the Gothenburg coach under whom Blomqvist won titles in 1993, 1994 and 1996, told Swedish daily newspaper Aftonbladet on Monday: "We are very interested," as Blomqvist's future at Manchester United is in doubt.

The 26-year-old left-sided midfielder joined the Premier League champions in 1998 after two seasons in Italy's Serie A with AC Milan and Parma.

Although he was effectively Ryan Giggs' deputy, Blomqvist made 24 league and seven Champions League appearances in United's 1999 Treble-winning season but a knee injury has kept him out of the side since mid-1999.

The Swedish international, whose contract with the Premier League expires at the end of June, is back in his home country for rehabilitation at the moment.

## Figo coming to London

MADRID, Jan 16: Real Madrid's Luis Figo, the world's most expensive player will head for London early Tuesday to attend the annual World Sport Award gala for top sporting stars, a Real spokesman said Monday, reports AFP.

Portuguese international Figo will be hoping for another award to add to his recently acquired Golden Ball, handed over before Sunday's 4-0 league win over Real Oviedo, to mark his selection as European Footballer of the Year.

# ROK not amused



SEOUL, Jan 16: South Korea's top football official on Tuesday accused Japan of undermining their co-hosting of the 2002 World Cup finals as the rivals marked the 500-day countdown to the start of the event, reports AFP.

Korean organising committee chief Chung Mong-Joon, a vice president of the international governing body FIFA, condemned Japan's organising committee for trying to change the official title of the event.

The South Korean committee, KOWOC, has made an official complaint to FIFA because Japan is putting its name before Korea on tickets. Under a 1996 accord, the tournament should be called "2002 FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan."

Chung attacked the Japanese organising committee, JAWOC, at a press conference called to launch the countdown.

"The fact that JAWOC is trying to change the order of the official title to Japan/Korea I think will be in violation of the agreement with FIFA," he said. "I think this will also undermine the co-hosting spirit between the two countries," Chung said.

KOWOC made an official complaint to the international governing body last Thursday, a KOWOC spokeswoman said.

The two countries were fierce rivals to secure the finals before FIFA awarded the event to both in 1996. They made an accord on several co-hosting disputes the same year.

With FIFA as arbitrators, they agreed on the official title of the tournament and that the opening match on May 31, 2002 would be in Seoul, with the final played in Yokohama, Japan on June 30, 2002.

The Japanese organising committee (JAWOC) has changed the order to Japan-Korea on its tickets for domestic sales. Tickets go on sale around the world on February 15.

Chung also complained that KOWOC was only informed of the change by its Japanese counterpart "at the last minute."

JAWOC has argued there was an unofficial agreement that the name rule would not apply to domestic promotional campaigns and only concerned the English title, officials said.

JAWOC has insisted it will continue to use Japan-Korea during the build up to the 32-nation competition which is being co-hosted for the first time.

In a prepared statement, Chung acknowledged worries about South Korea and Japan jointly hosting the first World Cup finals to be held in Asia.

"Such concerns were justified because there was no such precedent of co-hosting in the history of the World Cup and because historically the two countries were at odds with each other."

"In order to eliminate such concerns and to make the event a resounding success, Korea and Japan must work closely together based on the spirit of co-hosting."

Chung insisted that so far there had been no "major hitches" but both countries must be careful.

"To prevent any unexpected problems from undermining the success of the World Cup, the two countries need to develop a good understanding of the significance of co-hosting based on a mature partnership," Chung, who said he is considering standing for the FIFA presidency or as South Korea's head of state, said the fact that South Korea was spending at least two billion dollars on 10 new stadiums "shows our commitment to keep our promises."

Both countries are plunging ahead though with frenzied construction and renovation of stadiums. The Confederations Cup -- to be held in South Korea and Japan in June -- will be the first big rehearsal.

The 63,930 seater Seoul World Cup stadium -- Asia's largest purpose built soccer stadium -- is more than two thirds finished and is due to be ready around September.

The Yokohama stadium, built in 1997, can seat 70,564 people but will be one of the smallest used for a final. The city of Yokohama will install 1,800 extra seats and is studying the possibility of putting seats on the field.

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## Maradona to play in Dubai

DUBAI, Jan 16: Diego Maradona has sealed a 250,000-dollar contract to play in Dubai in a testimonial match for retired Emirati international Abdul Rahman Mohammad at his Al-Nasr club, newspapers reported on Tuesday, reports AFP.

The Argentine football legend is expected in the Gulf emirate from Rome on Wednesday night to sign the contract for the March 8 match in benefit of Mohammad, who played for the United Arab Emirates in the 1990 World Cup finals in Italy.

Maradona, 40, was served with a writ for tax fraud of up to 24.6 million dollars as he flew into Rome last week.

## Lazio looking for cash boost

ROME, Jan 16: Italian champions Lazio are looking for new financial partners to bring new investment to the club, their president Sergio Cragnotti said Monday, reports AFP.

Cragnotti, speaking at an extraordinary general meeting of shareholders of the tomato sauce giants Cirio which is Lazio's parent company, said a new cash injection was needed to finance several projects including the development of a new stadium.

"The operation is underway," said Cragnotti. "We want to diversify Lazio's capital."

"The club has important projects and we need to find shareholders who can give the correct and necessary synergy to these plans."

Plans for a new stadium will be unveiled in February. The club wants the new partners to take a 10-percent stake in the outfit that was floated on the Milan Stock Exchange in 1998.

## Galliani backs Zaccheroni

MILAN, Jan 16: AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani gave his beleaguered coach Alberto Zaccheroni a belated vote of confidence on Tuesday, reports AFP.

Galliani, who in the aftermath of Saturday evening's 4-0 defeat by Fiorentina said he had shelved talks on a new contract with Zaccheroni, told Gazzetta dello Sport that "Zac" retained his full backing.

Galliani said: "I have received about 100 phone calls since the Fiorentina defeat about the position of the coach and I want to make it clear: Zaccheroni has our full confidence and is under no risk at all."

Galliani, the de facto head of the club while AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi concentrates on his bid to become Italy's Prime Minister for a second time, skillfully sidestepped the rumour that has been circulating since even before the Fiorentina game that Milan want the Florence club's Turkish coach Fatih Terim to replace Zaccheroni.

Asked if he admired the work of Terim, Galliani said: "Certainly, even last year when he was in charge of (Istanbul outfit) Galatasaray. Just like I admire the work of Zaccheroni when things are going well... at the beginning of the season Terim was facing the sack as well."

Zaccheroni joined the San Siro giants from Udinese in the summer of 1998 and surprised most pundits by guiding the Rossoneri to the Scudetto (title) in his first year in charge.

In that year Milan only became realistic title contenders in the last few weeks of the campaign after Lazio, Fiorentina and Parma all faded badly.

He has been offered a new contract until June 30, 2002 but has been holding out on signing it, reportedly because of a clause that says it will not be binding on the club if Milan do not qualify for next year's Champions League.

Milan are currently sixth in Serie A and in the second phase of this year's Champions League.



Miroslav Blazevic, the new Iran national team coach, explaining something during a press conference in Tehran yesterday. - AFP photo

# Alex's mixed fortune



SAINT ETIENNE, France, Jan 16: Brazilian striker Alex of French First Division side Saint Etienne was placed under formal investigation on Monday as the French league and police investigation into false passports widened, reports AFP.

Alex turned himself in to the Lyon police after taking a flight from Brazil via Frankfurt on Sunday.

He appeared before an investigating magistrate in Saint Etienne to answer questions over the validity of his Portuguese passport and judicial sources said he was under formal investigation - though he was released from custody Monday evening.

Ironically, Alex did receive

some good news Monday as he was voted the top foreign player in the French league, according to respected football magazine France Football.

The lawyer of Alex's teammate and fellow Brazilian Jose Aloisio said his client is also facing investigation in the coming days.

The passport scam dragnet widened still further to net Colombian goalkeeper Farid Mondragon, who plays for First Division Metz.

Mondragon, who is understood to have been playing with a Greek passport, was detained by police on Monday, judicial sources said.

French league rules stipulate that only three non-European Union players are allowed to play in the same

match for the same team, hence the efforts by their entourage to obtain EU papers.

Metz officials said three police had arrived at the club to check the player's documents as well as those of Argentine striker Patricio D'Amico.

Metz sporting director Patrick Razurel said officers wanted to check "certain elements" of Mondragon's papers.

A spokesman for the Moselle prefecture, which governs the northeastern city of Metz, told AFP that the French consulate in Athens was examining Mondragon's papers to verify initial claims by his club that he qualifies for a Greek passport through his father.

Italian officials are likewise checking D'Amico's documents. The case involving 28-year-old Alex, who has scored 11 goals for St Etienne this season and who is due to appear before a French league hearing Tuesday - is one of a rash to rock French football.

Suspicion has also fallen on the Greek passport of Alex's former teammate at the central French club, Ukrainian Maxim Levitsky, who has moved to Spartak Moscow.

Both players came under the microscope after Toulouse team management noticed a difference in their nationalities on a team sheet prior to a league game on December 2.

Alex, named on a previous team sheet in November as Portuguese, had reverted to using his Brazilian league investigation - somewhat forced due to the recent revelation that Second Division Nancy's former Argentinian forward Diego Garay had played last season with a false Italian passport - shed some light on the shady goings-on in French league football.

St Etienne are under investigation for fielding players with false documents and could be deducted points from as many as six league matches if they are found guilty. However, the French football authorities are not alone.

In December, AC Milan's Brazilian goalkeeper Nelson De Jesus Silva, known as Dida, was also charged with using a false passport.

The 27-year-old player's lawyer, Massimo Bassi, submitted a file to an Italian court in which Dida affirmed having acquired his Portuguese passport from a "non-Italian" middle man.

# UEFA-FIFA war on cards



PARIS, Jan 16: A power struggle between AC UEFA and FIFA risks splitting football in two as Europe threatens to go it alone in the row over the introduction of an international transfer system that would be approved by the European Commission, reports AFP.

The clash between FIFA, the sport's world governing body, and UEFA, rulers of European football, reached a new low this week when UEFA announced it was cutting off all discussions with FIFA unless certain conditions were met.

At the centre of the dispute are proposals put forward by FIFA and sent to the European Commission.

European soccer chiefs claim the FIFA proposals, which would allow players to leave their clubs with just three months' notice, will cause chaos.

"If this were to be allowed to happen it would kill the game as we know it," said David Dein, vice chairman of Arsenal and the Football Association.

"It is totally impractical and unworkable. The sport would become unmanageable and I simply don't understand the rationale," he added.

Dein warned that FIFA should remember the people that elected them. "It's more than FIFA dare to ignore those who put them in power. FIFA have put something forward without the consent of their most powerful confederation, which is unacceptable."

"It will make the chasm with UEFA wider than before. If this is true then clearly the FIFA headquarters must be suffering from a dose of mad cow disease," said Dein.

UEFA, who are holding an emergency executive committee meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday in Nyon, Switzerland, claim the proposals were made without consultation and should be withdrawn immediately.

Following a meeting on Monday between UEFA and the top 13 European Leagues, UEFA issued a statement totally rejecting FIFA's blueprint.

"The meeting expressed its anger that FIFA have failed to officially withdraw their latest proposals. The meeting also agreed that no further meetings should be held with FIFA unless certain principles were now agreed," said the UEFA statement.

UEFA general secretary Gerhard Aigner warned that Europe may decide to go it alone.

"We are prepared to put forward proposals to the (European) Commission. We have the possibilities to put forward proposals that are suitable on our own," said Aigner.

FIFA announced they were surprised at the reactions but insisted that talks between all sides should continue.

"FIFA has already achieved important results in the ongoing negotiations and is committed to doing its utmost to find a global solution that will be satisfactory to all parties," said the FIFA statement.

"The world-governing body also points out that rather than heading for a conflict, which would lead to a court decision that would be detrimental to the world of sport, it prefers to continue by way of dialogue in order to reach a compromise that will be beneficial to all elements of the game," the FIFA statement added.

FIFA president Sep Blatter insists the proposals put forward were simply discussion papers.

"We've presented a paper to the Commission and said we want to negotiate. This is not the same as an imposition," said Blatter.

This is a discussion document. It's not a question of it being accepted or rejected," he added.

"Any pressure that might be on me will disappear if I start performing well, but I hope people realise that I first have to get fit to play because the season in Argentina finished a month ago and I have been on holiday."

"I will need some time to get fit but I hope to play as soon as possible, although I do not know if I will play in the next match."

Angel watched Villa being hammered 3-0 at home by Liverpool on Saturday, but said: "I don't really want to talk about that game."

"I've only been here two days. It was only one match. It was unfortunate but it is impossible to give an opinion based on one game."

Villamanager, John Gregory, said: "I am delighted to have finally secured his services. It feels great."

"I wish we could have had him for the weekend game with Liverpool and it's been a long drawn-out affair, but we have got there in the end."

# Angel seeks time to deliver



LONDON, Jan 16: Aston Villa's new 14 million-dollar signing, Colombian striker Juan Pablo Angel, completed his move Monday and promised to make a success of his stint in the English Premiership once he has settled down, reports AFP.

Colombian international Angel said it would take time to get back to his best form after three weeks out of action since the end of the Argentine season, where he signed off with 17 goals in as many matches.

After signing a four-and-a-half-year contract he could well face leaders Manchester United on Saturday at Old Trafford.

Angel said: "It's been a long-held ambition of mine to play in the Premiership and I will try to adapt as soon as possible to the English game."

"People mention the price tag but that is between the two clubs and for me is not important."

"What is important is for me to start performing as quickly as possible for Aston Villa and I believe that I can handle the pressure."

"Villa have had some big-name strikers like Savo Milosevic and Stan Collymore who have not always delivered the goods but I want to break

that mould.

"I played for River Plate, who are a big team in Argentina when the pressure is always on and I can handle it here."