

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 Perpere 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 footballing 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 is in doubt.

The 26-year-old left-sided midfielder joined the Premiership 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 Premiership leaders 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 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 con-

sidering standing for the FIFA presidency or as South Korea's head of state, said the fact that South Korea was spending almost two billion dollars on 10 new stadiums "shows our commitment to keep our promises."

Both countries are ploughing 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 tournament.

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tinuing to change the order of the official title to Japan/Korea. I think will be in violation of the agreement with FIFA.

"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.

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