



Real Sociedad and Atletico Madrid players observing a minute's silence while children hold an Atletico Madrid flag with a black mourning ribbon in memory of the 200 victims of Thursday's train bombings before the start of their match at Anoeta stadium in San Sebastian on March 13.

Primera Liga

Real draw on sombre day

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid dropped points at the Bernabeu for only the second time this season when they were held to a 1-1 draw by Real Zaragoza on Saturday in a game overshadowed by this week's bomb attacks in the city.

There was a sombre atmosphere at the stadium as the players of both sides walked on to the pitch carrying a white banner emblazoned with a black ribbon of mourning and wearing black armbands.

At one end of the stadium supporters unfurled a huge Spanish flag during the minute's silence that preceded the match and many of the 70,000 fans held aloft flags and banners in memory of the 200 victims of Thursday's train bombings.

"It was a very strange day for all of us and very difficult to play

football given the events of this week," Real Madrid's acting captain Roberto Carlos said.

Real, fielding several second-string players, took the lead just before the half hour when reserve striker Javier Portillo headed in at the far post after a fine cross from midfielder Juanfran.

But Zaragoza, who play Real in next week's King's Cup final, hit back four minutes later when defender Delio Toledo nodded in an angled header after a corner.

The result left Real seven points clear of Valencia at the top of the table, but Rafa Benitez's side can cut the deficit if they win away at relegation-threatened Celta Vigo on Sunday.

Real Sociedad claimed their first win in six games with a 2-1 victory over sixth-placed Atletico Madrid in Saturday's late match, a result that helped push them well clear of the relegation zone.

There was an understandably muted start to the match at the

Bernabeu, and Real, missing leading scorer Ronaldo and fellow striker Raul, were slow to find their rhythm.

The game eventually sparked into life midway through the first half when Real defender Roberto Carlos's thundering 25-metre free kick was tipped over the bar by Zaragoza keeper Cesar Lainez.

Eight minutes later Real took the lead when Portillo, who has spent most of the season on the bench deputising for Ronaldo, headed in from close range after second-string midfielder Juanfran weaved his way in from the right.

But Zaragoza were back on level terms just four minutes later, Paraguayan international Toledo popping up unmarked at the far post to score with an angled header after a corner.

Real coach Carlos Queiroz threw on Luis Figo and Guti early in the second half in an attempt to spice up the midfield but they were unable to help their side break

down the well-drilled Zaragoza defence.

It was the visitors who came closest to grabbing all three points when they unleashed several dangerous attacks late in the game.

Real keeper Iker Casillas produced a perfectly timed save to snatch the ball from the feet of midfielder Luciano Galletti after he had beaten the offside trap, and striker Goran Drulic hit the post after a slick passing move 12 minutes from time.

TOP SIX										
Spanish league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):										
Real	28	18	7	3	56	31	61			
Valencia	27	16	6	5	50	20	54			
Deportivo	27	15	5	7	43	23	50			
Barcelona	27	14	7	6	45	32	49			
Bilbao	27	11	8	8	34	33	41			
Atletico	28	11	8	9	34	34	41			

Premiership
Gunners march closer

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal marched another step closer to reclaiming the English Premiership title on Saturday as Leicester ended a tumultuous week on a high by escaping from the relegation zone.

Goals from French duo Thierry Henry and Robert Pires denied Arsenal's title rivals a glimmer of hope as the Gunners overcame bogey team Blackburn 2-0 to stay nine points clear of Chelsea at the top of the table.

Henry curled a 25-yard free-kick into the net 12 minutes after the break and Pires netted a last-minute rebound to secure a 2-0 win that dashed Chelsea and Manchester United's hopes of a slip-up from the unbeaten leaders.

Chelsea kept up the chase with a smash-and-grab 2-0 win at Bolton but with only ten matches left to play, the gap at the top increasingly looks too big to close.

United can move back to within nine points of the leaders if they beat Manchester City on Sunday.

Leicester City meanwhile won for the first time in 14 league matches in the most unlikely circumstances.

Les Ferdinand's 53rd-minute strike was a desperately-needed tonic for a club engulfed by allegations that three of their players were involved in a serious sexual assault during a mid-season break in Spain.

Manager Micky Adams said the win had been a welcome diversion from the scandal engulfing the club.

"All I ever wanted to do was get back in that technical area and get a team winning games of football and we've won one today," Adams said.

But Adams claimed he had not been surprised by the response his players gave under extreme pressure.

"Everybody had written us off. The cynics, the doubters had a field day with us. We were on the front pages as well as the back pages. So we had to give everybody our answer and show people that we care passionately about our football club."

Arsenal had to work hard for their three points and, as so often this season, it was the brilliance of Henry that made the difference.

Fouled by Craig Short outside the box, the Frenchman got up to score his 21st league goal of the season in spectacular fashion 12 minutes after the break before Pires made absolutely sure in the dying seconds.

"Blackburn gave everything and we had to be patient, not frustrated

and find an opening and Thierry found it," said Gunners boss Arsene Wenger.

Second half goals from John Terry and Damien Duff saw Chelsea claim all the points at Bolton, who had dominated most of the early proceedings and been denied only by the woodwork and a superb save by stand-in goalkeeper Marco Ambrosio in the first half.

Blues skipper Terry insisted afterwards that the title race was still alive.

"Sooner or later they have to slip up. If we can keep grinding out results like that we are going to put pressure on them," he said.

Arsenal's performance suggested otherwise however and Terry and the Chelsea fans should not hold their breath waiting for a collapse by their London rivals.

As Leicester were celebrating their escape from the drop zone, Portsmouth suffered the misery of falling back into the bottom three.

Wayne Rooney did the damage, firing Everton to a 1-0 win at Goodison Park that eased the Merseysiders own fears of being drawn into the relegation quagmire.

"It is a very big result," Everton boss David Moyes said, admitting the game had offered little in the way of spectacle.

"We both had to win and it showed really. We are just delighted to have taken all three points."

After recent draws with Liverpool and Manchester United, the gloom

descended on Leeds United once again as a 2-0 defeat at Fulham left them firmly anchored to the bottom of the table.

Goals from Sean Davis and Luis Boa Morte ensured the Cottagers were able to welcome Chris Coleman back to the touchline in style.

The Fulham boss had been absent for two weeks with a viral infection that left him hospitalised and on a drip.

"The first goal was always going to decide it and we conceded it," Leeds caretaker boss Eddie Gray said.

"But there are still a lot of games to play and I still think we have got the players in that dressing room that can win matches."

Charlton edged the day's other match, a 25th-minute strike from Matt Holland enough to move them back up to fourth after a 1-0 win over Middlesbrough.

TOP SIX										
English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):										
Arsenal	28	21	7	0	55	18	70			
Chelsea	28	19	4	5	50	21	61			
Man Utd	27	18	4	5	51	25	58			
Charlton	28	12	7	9	39	34	43			
Newcastle	27	10	12	5	38	28	42			
Birmingham	28	11	9	8	30	30	42			



Arsenal's Jose Reyes (C) being restrained by Blackburn's Craig Short (L) and Jon Douglas at Ewood Park on March 13.

FIFA set to get tough

AFP, Paris

World football's governing body FIFA is to clamp down on countries buying in foreign players like oil-rich Qatar's pursuit of Brazilian striker Ailton.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter is to chair an emergency committee in Zurich on Tuesday to tackle the policy followed so enthusiastically by Qatar's French coach Philippe Troussier.

One expected outcome of FIFA's decision to act on the controversial practise is that players swapping nationalities will have to live in their adopted country for a continuous two year period, a FIFA source told AFP Saturday.

Qatar's intention to sign Werder Bremen's Ailton to help the Gulf state qualify for the 2006 World Cup finals has been heavily criticised in some quarters.

"It flouts the sporting spirit," the FIFA source said.

Ironically as news of FIFA's spoiler tactics emerged plans to sign Ailton and his compatriots Dede and Leandro were going ahead in Doha.

"I'll be travelling to Germany in the next 24 hours to put the finishing touches to the contracts for the three Brazilians," Manfred Hoener, the Qatar Football Federation's technical director, said.

FIFA executive committee member Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder, also the president of the German football federation, has described as ridiculous the way players acquire the nationality of a country with which they have absolutely no connection.

"It attacks the fundamental fabric of national teams."

"FIFA has acknowledged this abusive use of trying to change nationality (in the Ailton affair) and want to oppose it," he said this week.

Qatar have already lashed out the cash in athletics.

Joining Blatter on the emergency committee next week are UEFA boss Lennart Johansson, (representing Europe), Issa Hayatou (Africa), Jack Warner (North America), Qatar's Mohamed Bin Hamman (Asia), Nicolas Leoz (South America) and Ahongalu Fusimalohi (Oceania).

Last year, Kenyan-born steeplechaser Stephen Cherono and 5,000 metres runner Albert Chepkirui controversially changed nationality to compete for the Gulf state.

Cherono, under his new name of Saif Saeed Shaheen, won the gold medal for Qatar in the 3,000m steeplechase at the World Championships in Paris in August.

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham has dismissed speculation that he is on the verge of a multi-million pound move back to England as "rubbish" and insisted he wants to see out the remaining three and a half years of his Real Madrid contract.

Persistent rumours that the England captain's family are unhappy in the Spanish family have fuelled reports that he is set to return to his native London with big-spending Chelsea the favourites to find the huge transfer fee that Real would inevitably demand for the world's most marketable player.

But Beckham, who joined Real from Manchester United for 25 million pounds (45 million dollars) last summer, said suggestions he had failed to settle in Spain were wide of the mark.

"People say there are problems and I want to go back to England but all the speculation surrounding a move back home is rubbish," Beckham told the News of the World newspaper on Sunday.

"There is absolutely no question of me putting in a transfer request. Why would I? I have signed a four-year contract with Real Madrid. I want to stay here."

"I am happy. I am playing great football, everyone can see how much I am enjoying my football. There have been loads of rumours. Have I met Roman Abramovich? Yeah, right!"

"Other rumours say I have had meetings with other clubs in England. The answer is categorically no. I am a happy Real Madrid player and that's the way it is."

Beckham admitted he was unhappy with the intense attention that he, his wife Victoria and sons Romeo and Brooklyn get from the paparazzi in Madrid.

But he said that was offset by the warmth of ordinary Spanish people and the bond he has forged with his new club mates.

"The people are great to me and so are the club and my team-mates. And on the pitch I am very, very happy."

"As I have said so many times since I joined Real Madrid, I signed a four-year contract, so why would I move when I am already happy?"

A fresh wave of speculation over



LET ME FLY AWAY! SV Werder Bremen's Ailton (R) taking a fall under pressure from FC Cologne's Thomas Cichon in Bremen on March 13.

Bundesliga

Bremen running away

Football

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen appear to have one hand on the German championship after moving nine points clear of holders Bayern Munich with a hard-fought 3-2 victory over Cologne on Saturday.

Bayern needed a late penalty from Dutchman Roy Makaay to salvage a point in a 3-3 draw with Hansa Rostock at the Olympic Stadium after throwing away a two-goal lead.

"If you lead 2-0 you expect to win the match," bemoaned Bayern manager Ottmar Hitzfeld, who saw his team crash out of the Champions League to Real Madrid in midweek.

"We were too passive and let them in."

After their exit from Europe on Wednesday Bayern were desperate to turn up the heat on Bremen, but what resembled a Jekyll and Hyde display looks to have ended their hopes of a trophy this season.

With just ten games of the Bundesliga season remaining it would take a domino-style collapse to stop Bremen picking up a first crown since 1993.

"There are statistics being banded about but they don't mean anything," explained Bremen chief Thomas Schaaf referring to their league lead.

He added: "After a great first half we did not get going in the second and were just glad to hold on against Cologne who made life difficult."

Any suggestions that Bayern would endure a European hang-over were unfounded as they took a two-goal lead within nine minutes.

After just three minutes German international Jens Jeremies played a brilliant one-two with Makaay on the edge of the area and raced past the static Rostock defence to slot home.

Six minutes later Hansa goalkeeper Mathias Schober failed to hold a fierce Michael Ballack volley and Makaay was on hand to notch his 16th goal of the season.

The points looked secure but

Hansa saw a weakness in the Bayern rearguard and exploited it.

Martin Max pulled a goal back for Hansa at the start of the second period with Ghana defender Sammy Kuffour's positioning leaving a lot to be desired.

Swede Magnus Arvidsson then used his pace to forge clear and crash an effort past Oliver Kahn on 65 minutes for the equaliser.

"Perhaps because we are chasing Bremen we can not relax and make mistakes," claimed German international Kahn. "Last season we had a huge lead and were more composed."

When Thomas Rasmussen put Rostock in front after 72 minutes a shell-shocked Bayern looked set for their first league defeat of the campaign.

But four minutes later Brazilian Ze Roberto was felled in the penalty area and the lethal Makaay stepped up to convert his 17th goal of a fruitful campaign.

In a top against bottom clash Bremen needed all their resilience to hold onto a 3-2 win against a spirited Cologne at the Westerstadion.

The league leaders were cruising after going three goals up in the first period but were forced onto the back foot when Cologne reduced the deficit to a single goal.

On-form French playmaker Johan Micoud opened the scoring on 16 minutes with a left-footed drive before Ailton turned on the

style.

The brilliant Brazilian, who is entangled in a row over whether he can represent oil-rich Qatar, struck on 37 minutes to double Bremen's lead and then produced a superb volley seven minutes later to leave Cologne in tatters.

But the basement boys hit back with goals from Oliver Schroder (57) and Dirk Lottner (71) as the Bremen backline wobbled.

However, Thomas Schaaf's side kept their heads, although Cologne had a goal disallowed late on, to take a giant stride towards a first Bundesliga crown in over a decade.

Elsewhere Bayer Leverkusen recorded their first win in 2004 with a 4-2 triumph over VfL Wolfsburg at the BayArena.

Klaus Augenthaler's charges were title contenders before the winter break but have slumped down the ladder and securing a spot in Europe is now the priority.

TOP SIX										
German league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):										
Bremen	24	18	4	2	59	23	58			
Bayern	24	14	7	3	53	26	49			
Stuttgart	23	12	7	4	29	10	43			
Leverkusen	24	11	6	7	44	33	41			
Bochum	23	10	6	7	40	31	36			
Schalke	24	9	9	6	29	26	36			