

Stadiums reopen across Italy

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's interior ministry has reopened to the public 12 more stadiums closed after a policeman was killed by rioting fans earlier this month.

In a statement on Thursday, the ministry said the grounds at Messina and Modena would be fully reopened.

Only season ticket holders will be allowed at Bergamo, Empoli, Florence, Lecce, Livorno, Perugia, Pescara, Trieste, Udine and Verona if the required safety measures are implemented.

The decision brings to 23 the number of stadiums that to varying degrees meet tougher regulations introduced by the government to stop hooliganism at matches after the policeman's death occurred during the Serie A match between Palermo and Catania on Feb. 2.

Capello quashes Emerson rumours

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello moved to quash further murmurs of dissent inside the Bernabeu on Thursday by denying that Brazilian midfielder Emerson had refused to play against Bayern Munich.

Spain has already been gripped by one alleged refusal to take to the field as Barcelona coach Franck Rijkaard last week claimed that his star Cameroon forward Samuel Eto'o had refused to come on as a substitute -- a charge Eto'o publicly denied.

Now Capello has been forced into denying his player acted in such a way during Tuesday's Champions League last 16 first leg tie.

"Emerson did not refuse (to come on as a sub). That's a lie. He did not tell me that he would not play," said Capello.

"It was not an act of indiscipline. He is a player in our team and we can count on him."

Capello was speaking ahead of this weekend's Madrid derby with Atletico.

Cadena Ser radio station had said Wednesday on its internet site that Emerson had copied Eto'o.

"There were 20 minutes to play when the Italian coach (Capello) asked Emerson to go and warm up."

"But, taking a leaf out of Barcelona player Samuel Eto'o's book, he refused and the cameras are our witness."

However, also on Wednesday, Real left back Roberto Carlos, another Brazilian, denied that his international colleague had refused to warm up.

Catania lose ban appeal

AFP, Rome

The Italian football federation's disciplinary commission on Thursday rejected Catania's appeal against their stadium ban.

The Massimino stadium was closed in the wake of the fan riot earlier this month in which a policeman was killed.

The Sicilian club pleaded for the ban to be lifted on the grounds that most of the trouble occurred outside of the stadium, but the disciplinary commission upheld their decision.

Therefore the stadium will remain shut for the rest of the Serie A season and Catania must play all of their home matches at neutral grounds.

Catania are at 'home' to Serie A leaders Inter Milan on Sunday, but the match will be played in Cesena.

Now City for takeover?

AFP, London

English Premiership club Manchester City said in a statement to London's Stock Exchange on Thursday they were having discussions about a possible takeover of the club.

A bid from the USA is one of four consortiums competing for purchase of Manchester United's cross-town rivals, it is understood.

Although City said late last year that a financial injection may be forthcoming from an outside investor, their statement implies that the situation has moved on since then.

City's statement read: "The board of Manchester City notes the recent press speculation regarding the possibility of an offer being made for the company."

"Further to the company's announcement on December 7 2006, the board of Manchester City confirms that it remains in preliminary discussions with third parties that may or may not lead to an offer being made for the company."



PHOTO: AFP

Osasuna players gather to celebrate the only goal of the game in their UEFA Cup clash against Bordeaux in Pamplona on Thursday.

FIESTY MADRID DERBY

Barca aim to stop rot

AFP, Madrid



Spanish league leaders Barcelona will be looking to avoid a third consecutive defeat when they travel to struggling Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

"We know we lost to Valencia (last Sunday) and now Liverpool, that's the reality, but we now have to keep on working, trying to improve," said Barca coach Frank Rijkaard after their shock Champions League defeat to the Englishmen.

The Catalan club are still in pole position as they bid for their third straight La Liga crown but a recent rocky run of form has meant they are top from Sevilla on goal difference.

"Perhaps we are getting too predictable," said Barca's Mexican defender Rafa Marquez.

"Teams have learnt how to play against us, and how to contain Ronaldinho better, although they usually have to commit fouls to do it. "The team is aware of this and we are working on some new plays or changing our positions."

Liverpool coach Rafa Benitez admitted that one of the few moments he was worried during Wednesday's win was when Rijkaard moved Barca's Argentine teenager wonderkid Lionel Messi to the left wing from the opposite flank.

Messi, having played 90 minutes without any reaction against English Premiership side, is now set to start his first domestic league game since

he sustained a broken foot in November.

Rijkaard will have to replace the suspended Deco and Gianluca Zambrotta from the team which started against Liverpool so there are likely to be recalls for Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Andres Iniesta.

The necessity to secure three points in Bilbao may also force Rijkaard to gamble on bringing back Samuel Eto'o into the squad despite last season's top scorer in the Spanish first division still insisting that he is not 100 per cent fit.

Athletic Bilbao coach Mane Esnal probably wishes he had Rijkaard's problems though as the Basque side are just one place above the relegation zone.

The Bilbao players are also concerned about the fact that they could face the Barca backlash after their two important defeats.

"They will be coming out and looking to get back their confidence against us. We know they are outstanding professionals and they will looking to forget the Liverpool defeat with a good performance," reflected Athletic's Javi Casas.

Second-placed Sevilla have a tricky trip to Getafe on Sunday, where both Valencia and Real Madrid have both lost this season.

Coach Juande Ramos left out Fredi Kanoute, Adriano and Javi Navarro from the Sevilla squad that faced Steaua Bucharest in the UEFA Cup on Thursday in order to have some of his best men available for the anticipated battle.

However, Sevilla will be without

Daniel Alves and Jose Luis Marti in Madrid's southern suburbs as both players are suspended.

Real Madrid are four points in arrears of the leading pair in fourth place, just behind Valencia on goal difference, and have the derby match at local neighbours and rivals Atletico ahead of them on Sunday.

David Beckham will not make the short trip across the Spanish capital as he is suspended after getting sent off against Real Betis last Saturday.

In the wake of a good performance in Real's 3-2 win over Bayern Munich in the Champions League on Tuesday, Beckham's absence is a blow to the Spanish giant's under-fire coach Fabio Capello.

"We are arriving at the derby in good shape. We had a good game (against Bayern) and the last two results have been very positive," said Capello.

FIXTURES

(Kick-off times in GMT)

Saturday

Real Sociedad v Deportivo La Coruna (1900), Atletico Madrid v Real Madrid (1900)

Sunday

Real Betis v Recreativo Huelva (1600), Celta Vigo v Racing Santander (1600), Levante v Real Zaragoza (1600), Osasuna v Espanyol (1600), Getafe v Sevilla (1600), Villarreal v Real Mallorca (1600), Gimnastic Tarragona v Valencia (1900), Barcelona v Athletic Bilbao (2000)

Beckham dragged into political campaign

REUTERS, Berne

Real Madrid midfielder David Beckham has become unwittingly involved in regional Swiss politics after his photo was used to promote the election campaign of a former professional referee-turned politician.

The photo, carried by several Swiss newspapers last week, shows the former England captain shaking hands with Philippe Leuba ahead of a 2005 friendly between England and Argentina.

Leuba is standing in local government elections in the western Swiss region of Vaud and a thought bubble placed next to Beckham in the photo has the player supposedly wishing: "I hope you are just as impartial in the state parliament as you were on the football pitch."

Beckham's management said on Thursday they had already taken steps to prevent further distribution of the campaign photo.

"The individual in question did not seek approval with regards to the use of David's image and our lawyers have been in contact to see that the image is taken out of circulation," Beckham's spokesman Simon Oliveira said.

Shortly afterwards Leuba, 41, said there were no plans to reuse the image and that he himself had never authorized the campaign.

"It was just a joke, a surprise that a friend arranged for me in the newspapers," Leuba told Reuters. "I got a mail from Beckham's lawyers which I have passed on to the advertising agency involved but the whole thing is finished anyway."

"It was never part of my official campaign and I think it's amazing that it has got so much attention. I don't think anybody in Switzerland would really have thought that David Beckham was supporting my campaign or even knew anything about it."

Juventus seal Grygera deal

AFP, Rome

Juventus have completed the signing of Czech Republic international Zdenek Grygera, the Italian second division club confirmed on Thursday.

The 26-year-old defender, who has signed a five-year contract, will see out the remainder of his contract with Dutch club Ajax before joining Juventus in June.

Grygera has been with Ajax since the 2003-04 season.

Juventus are currently top of Serie B and on course for a swift return to the top division.

The Turin club were demoted from Serie A and given a nine-point penalty for their role in last summer's match-fixing scandal.

UEFA CUP LAST 16 DRAW

AFP, Paris

Newcastle (ENG) v AZ Alkmaar (NED)
Maccabi Haifa (ISR) v Espanyol (ESP)
Rangers (SCO) v Osasuna (ESP)
Sporting Braga (POR) v Tottenham (ENG)
Sevilla (ESP) v Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)
Lens (FRA) v Bayer Leverkusen (GER)
Paris SG (FRA) v Benfica (POR)
Celta Vigo (ESP) v Werder Bremen (GER)
1st leg: March 8; 2nd leg: March 14/15

Hearts owner blows top

REUTERS, Glasgow

Hearts owner Vladimir Romanov launched another rambling rant at Scottish journalists via the club's official website on Thursday.

He attacked writers for backing former captain Steven Pressley, who left for Celtic after having his Hearts contract torn up.

Pressley, flanked by keeper Craig Gordon and midfielder Paul Hartley, made a public statement in October criticising the way the club was being run, saying there was significant unrest in the dressing room.

Under the headline "Monkeys go home", Lithuanian Romanov launched a tirade on the Edinburgh club's official Web site (www.heartsfc.premiuntv.co.uk).

"You are one step away from becoming human beings," he said.

"Go and carefully have a look at yourself in the mirror. Don't you see a human in it? Stop fighting for the values which the ex-captain of Hearts was fighting for."

Romanov, who has made a number of rants since taking over the club, had officials hand out bananas and peanuts to the press before last weekend's Scottish Premier League home clash with St Mirren.

He added: "Education and truthful information -- that should be your input to humankind."

"Your leader Mowgli is not taking bananas any more, now he is taking money for lies and untruthful interpretation."

Romanov, told to quit by fans after the treatment of Pressley, ended the long statement by saying: "I beg you Mowgli, take the monkeys back to the safari park."

Leverkusen use experience

AFP, Blackburn



Blackburn goalkeeper Brad Friedel claimed his team were outdone by the European experience of Bayer Leverkusen after the German outfit progressed to the UEFA Cup

last 16 with a 0-0 second leg draw at Ewood Park on Thursday.

With the Bundesliga team holding a 3-2 advantage from the first-leg, Michael Skibbe's players frustrated the home side with some cynical time-wasting, feigning of injury and play-acting in a stormy last 32 clash.

But former USA keeper Friedel admitted that Blackburn simply paid the price for Leverkusen's nous in Europe's top competition.

He said: "Leverkusen did exactly what we expected of them because they have a lot of experience in their team and time-wasting is part and parcel of European football."

"But overall, Leverkusen probably deserved to go through on the basis of their performance in the first-leg in Germany. We had big chances late in the game. We needed them to go in if we are going to go through, but they didn't."

"I just hope we can build on this run, build on the experience we have gained this season and go on to prosper in Europe again in the future."

In a game that often boiled over with both sets of players confronting each other in the dying stages, Rovers boss Mark Hughes claimed that the ineffective refereeing of

Spanish official Alberto Undiano Mallenco contributed to the frustration on the pitch.

Hughes said: "The referee isn't the reason we were beaten over the two legs because we made mistakes in the two games, but he certainly needed to be a bit stronger."

"The damage was done in the first-leg, but we have learned from it and it's just a shame that we haven't been able to progress."

Bayer now face a last 16 clash against the winners of the Lens-Panathinaikos tie, but coach Skibbe admitted that Blackburn made it tough for his team.

Skibbe said: "It was difficult for us tonight because it was a big fight between both teams. Blackburn put us under a lot of pressure and they caused us lots of problems, especially from crosses."

Desperate times for Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Desperate Bayern Munich boss Ottmar Hitzfeld has issued a rallying call to his troops by claiming every match from now on is a cup final.

Bayern are almost certainly out of the championships race, sitting a mammoth 12 points off leaders Schalke 04, and face a battle just to snatch third place and a Champions League spot next season.

But to do so they have to make up five points on Werder Bremen and the desperation of their situation has not been lost on Hitzfeld, now back in charge of the double, double winners for the second time.

Ahead of Saturday's visit of VfL Wolfsburg, Hitzfeld told Bayern's website: "We'll spend the next two weeks working closely on defence. I have no intention of letting up. We have to cut out our errors."

Hitzfeld, one of European football's most successful coaches, saw his team score two useful away goals in their 3-2 defeat to Real Madrid in Spain in midweek, which gives them a chance of reaching the Champions League quarter-finals.

Domestic concerns are more worrying. Hitzfeld took over from

Felix Magath at the beginning of the month but two league defeats since then and a continued lack of goals has ramped up the pressure on the Bavarian giants.

But Hitzfeld is hopeful of turning things around.

"I hope (the Real Madrid result) has finally got us going and the storm has finally passed. Every match from now on is a cup final."

The Bayern boss will have to do without defenders Willy Sagnol and Martin Demichelis while Daniel Van Buyten is doubtful with the flu.

Hitzfeld is one of only two coaches in European footballing history, the other is Ernst Happel, to win the Champions League with two different clubs -- Borussia Dortmund in 1997 and Bayern in 2001 -- while he was just minutes away from another success in the heart-stopping 1999 final against Manchester United.

Schalke, on a run of 13 matches without defeat, host Bayer Leverkusen on Sunday and might hope the fatigue of Bayer's UEFA Cup action on Thursday will help them in their bid to win a first title since 1958.

Schalke coach Mirko Slomka can now count on skipper Marcelo Bordon of Brazil but playmaker Lincoln is doubtful with a thigh injury.

However Peter Lovenkrands's tearing of ankle ligaments, meaning he will be out for up to six weeks, leaves Slomka with only

two fit strikers in Kevin Kuranyi and Turk Halil Altintop. The other two front men Gerald Asamoah and Dane Soren Larsen are still trying to regain full fitness.

"Injuries have been piling up in recent weeks," Slomka said: "In an emergency I might have to pull on a jersey!"

Bremen were set to play Ajax in the UEFA Cup on Thursday before their Sunday trip to Borussia Monchengladbach.

Defender Clemens Fritz tried to rally the troops saying actions spoke louder than words. "We are more than unhappy about our recent performances," Fritz said. "We're done with talking and need to just get on with it."

Schalke lead by five points from VfB Stuttgart, who were due to host Hertha Berlin on Friday.

FIXTURES

Saturday

Bayern Munich v VfL Wolfsburg, Hamburg SV v Eintracht Frankfurt, Mainz 05 v Nuremberg, Hannover v Borussia Dortmund, VfL Bochum v Alemannia Aachen, Energie Cottbus v Arminia Bielefeld

Sunday

Schalke 04 v Bayer Leverkusen, Borussia Monchengladbach v Werder Bremen