

Vietnam refs
jailed for
match-fixing

AFP, Hanoi

A court in Vietnam on Monday gave jail terms of up to seven years to referees and officials after finding them guilty of taking and giving bribes to fix matches, a court official said.

Out of the nine defendants, four were given between four years and seven years in prison, including FIFA ranked referee Truong The Toan, the official from Hanoi's People's Court toldAFP, refusing to be named.

The five others were handed between two years and three years suspended sentences, he added. Among them was another FIFA ranked referee involved in the scam, Le Van Tu.

The referees and officials were charged with accepting hundreds of millions of dong (tens of thousands of dollars) in the 2004-2005 V-League seasons to be less tough on some clubs.

It took longer for the court, which had been scheduled to end after a two day hearing last week, to announce the verdict because the case was complicated, the official earlier said.

Allegations of corruption and match fixing among players and referees has marred Vietnam's domestic V-League since its debut in 2000-2001.

Magpies set to
sign Geremi

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle United were expected to complete the signing of Chelsea utility player Geremi on Monday.

He would the fourth summer signing for new boss Sam Allardyce following Mark Viduka, Joey Barton and David Rozehnal as the former Bolton boss rebuilds the squad on Tyneside.

The 28-year-old Cameroon international was understood to have agreed a three-year deal to secure his transfer to StJames' Park.

The former Real Madrid star, who spent a season on loan at Middlesbrough before heading for Stamford Bridge, made 28 appearances for the Blues last season, but has struggled to hold down a regular place.



PHOTO: AFP

Omar Bravo (L) of Mexico sets off to celebrate his second goal after putting the ball past Ecuador's goalkeeper Cristhian Mora during their Copa America Group B match in Maturin on Sunday.

Japan count on Nakamuras



Football

AFP, Tokyo

You could be forgiven for thinking you're seeing double when Japan go for goal from free kicks in their Asian Cup defence -- if Celtic star Shunsuke Nakamura doesn't line it up, another Nakamura will.

Kengo Nakamura, a Kawasaki Frontale midfielder who is younger and slightly smaller than Shunsuke, will join him in orchestrating set pieces which will be crucial on the rough pitch in Hanoi, the site of Group B.

"We'd better have two kickers to menace our opponents. The set play is important because it can turn the tide with just one blow," said Kengo, 26, who resembles 29-year-old Shunsuke with a long face and a slender frame.

Kengo, in his fifth year at Kawasaki, has scored one goal in six international matches.

He was capped for the first time after Ivica Osim took over from Brazilian legend Zico as coach following Japan's winless exit from the World Cup in Germany last year.

Left-footed Shunsuke and right-footed Kengo have been practicing free kicks together some 20 metres out during's Japan's training camp before leaving for Vietnam.

"Set plays are as important in the last Asian Cup as Europe," said Shunsuke, angling for a third straight Asian Cup winners medal.

"I have a lot of ideas. For example, I may pretend to kick on goal but flick the ball off Kengo's foot for another to kick," said the former Reggina player, whose deadball kicking helped Celtic clinch the Scottish Premiership title.

It was the first time that Osim had his squad practice set pieces, with the Bosnian, who led the former Yugoslavia to the 1990 World Cup quarter-finals, knowing he will need all the tricks he can

conjure up to win the title.

"It will be hard to play football by moving the ball around with one-touches in Hanoi," he said.

"Therefore, we need to be able to do it both ways -- attack on combination plays either from a deadball situation or through one-touches.

"We may be trying more different things when the time gets near."

He said he was most concerned about the hot and humid weather in the rainy season in Vietnam, one of the Asian Cup co-hosts who also include Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

"It's worth weighing who can run and who cannot. I may take into account the temperature on the day in deciding the starting line-up," Osim said.

Japan play Asian Games champions Qatar on July 9 in their opener. Gulf Cup champions United Arab Emirates and hosts Vietnam are also in their group.

Klose close to
perfection

AFP, Hong Kong

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld set his sights on winning back the Bundesliga title after hailing a virtually flawless goal-scoring debut by Miroslav Klose.

Hitzfeld rated Klose's performance as 99 out of 100 as the striker capped a menacing display with a headed equaliser in Bayern's 2-1 friendly win over Sao Paulo here on Sunday.

"Most people know about him, he has a lot of possibilities and a lot of skill. He's also an integral part of the German national squad," enthused Hitzfeld.

"He's very quick, he's very mobile, so I'm pretty sure you can expect a lot from him next season."

Klose was at the heart of Bayern's best moments and also won the free-kick which led to the winning goal by Hamit Altintop, another impressive newcomer.

The two are among nine new players in a 69-million-euro (93-million-dollar) revamp after Bayern's fourth-place Bundesliga finish, their worst performance in more than a decade.

Hitzfeld will link Klose with World Cup-winning striker Luca Toni and French midfielder Franck Ribery as he bids to bounce back quickly and return to the Champions League.

"Bayern Munich's top target is always to win everything we play in. Let's see how it works out," said the coach.

The 20-time German champions have off-loaded seven players including England midfielder Owen Hargreaves, who has completed a reported 34-million-dollar move to Manchester United.

Houllier keeps
options open

AFP, Hong Kong

Top-rated coach Gerard Houllier said he has "plenty of options" but is undecided on his future after leaving French champions Lyon.

Houllier, whose FIFA World Stars were beaten 2-0 by China on Sunday, said he did not know whether he would continue his sabbatical or seek a quick return to full-time football.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. For the moment I'm just enjoying my break," he said.

"To be honest with you I have got plenty of options so I will just see what comes along."

Soccer may unite Iraq



Football

AFP, Bangkok

One thing is certain. If Iraq beat the odds and shine at the Asian Cup as they did at the Asian Games last year, football will again spark a rare source of shared joy in the divided sectarian nation.

Despite the bombings, kidnappings and killings, power blackouts and fuel shortages, passion for football endures in a country that used to be a dominant regional force and qualified for the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

Iraq's run to the final of the Asian Games in Qatar was greeted back home by rounds of small arms fire as people celebrated, some even dancing in the streets.

They lost the crunch match to the host nation but it was a glimmer of light for the war-weary residents.

Since those glory days coach Akram Salman has been fired after they failed to get past the group stages of the Gulf Cup in January.

In his place has come Brazil's Jorvan Vieira, 53, who took charge in May, giving him scant time to prepare for a group that also features favourites Australia, Oman and Thailand.

Vieira is a brave man with three coaches of the senior team previously quitting because of death threats, while officials have been kidnapped and one even murdered.

He admits it is hard, but not as hard as for his players.

"I don't have one person in this group who hasn't lost someone from their family," Vieira said.

"But they never mix politics in the team. They never talk about it. I have Sunni and I have Shiite and there is no problem. They are very close."

Iraqi football has been through dire times since the US-led 2003 invasion with its stadiums wrecked, little money for equipment, and rampant violence.

Travelling in Iraq is so dangerous that the Iraqi league has been divided into three regions while the national team plays its home matches in Amman.

"There is no organisation," said Vieira. "Nothing. I have to understand why, because of the kind of life these people are living."

The Brazilian brings a wealth of experience to his role.

Despite being sacked last November as coach of Saudi Arabian side Al Taii, he has previously managed clubs in Oman,

Qatar and Kuwait, as well as the Malaysian U-20 side.

Iraq have the honour of playing the opening match of the tournament at Rajamangala National Stadium here on Saturday against co-hosts Thailand, which could be their best chance to pick up points.

Oman follow on July 12 with Australia a day later on July 13.

"I'm planning to go as far as possible," Vieira said. "I'm not looking for first place in our group but I want second place. Australia have a lot of chances to come top."

For the squad, exposure at the Asian Cup could be the motivation they need.

Iraqi players dream of Europe and the big salaries of the continent's club professionals, away from the perils of their war-torn country where their talents go unrewarded.

With scouts expected at the tournament, there is hope they will be noticed and get the chance of a lucrative contract with a foreign club.

Some squad members already play in Iran, Libya, the UAE and Qatar, including talented young striker Younis Mahmoud who scored 19 goals for Qatar's Al Gharafa this season.

West Ham fetch Faubert



Football

AFP, London

West Ham confirmed Sunday they have signed rising French star Julien Faubert from Bordeaux.

The 23-year-old midfielder has penned a five-year contract worth 6.1 million pounds (12 million dollars), becoming manager Alan Curbishley's second summer capture following the arrival of Scott Parker from Newcastle.

Club chairman Eggert Magnusson told the club's website: "I am delighted to welcome Julien to Upton Park and feel sure that he will become a very successful signing for the club.

"He is one of the most highly-rated young players in European football and many clubs were attempting to sign him, so we are very pleased that he has decided to join West Ham United."

"I have been very impressed by his desire and ambition and I think he will be very popular among our supporters."

Faubert had been angling for a move to Rangers in Scotland but Bordeaux rejected their offer, thought to be in the region of 4.5 million pounds.

Bordeaux's new coach Laurent Blanc had wanted to keep the midfielder but president Jean-Louis Triaud earlier revealed he had accepted West Ham's bid.

Faubert's capture will help ease West Ham's pain on miss-

ing out on Darren Bent, who recently snubbed the club for Tottenham despite being offered better terms at Upton Park.

Faubert began his professional career at Cannes before joining Bordeaux three years ago. He helped the club finish runners up in the French championship in 2006, qualifying them for last season's Champions League.

His France debut came against Bosnia in August, and he marked the occasion with the winner in a 2-1 victory.

He was the first player to wear Les Bleus' number 10 shirt since the retirement of the legendary Zinedine Zidane. As well as West Ham and Rangers, Roma were believed to be interested in acquiring the player.