



PHOTO: AFP  
Iraq midfielder Hawar Mohammed (L) slots into the net to score after leaving Australia defender Patrick Kisnorbo in his wake during their Asian Cup group match at the Ratchamangla Stadium in Bangkok on Friday.

Youngster sorry for jibe

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Uzbek youngster Aziz Haydarov has apologised for the cheeky "Iran go home" message he showed to media ahead of their Asian Cup opener, his coach said on Friday.

The jibe apparently angered Iran and Haydarov took a kick to the hip during the 2-1 loss that could rule him out of Saturday's clash with Malaysia, Rauf Inilejev said.

"It seems to me that Iran were a bit angry," Inilejev said. "I didn't see what he wrote on the paper in the press conference but I think he didn't mean it."

"He's young and he just wanted to stir things up a bit. He made a mistake and he realises that now."

"He's said sorry to Iranian officials and journalists. He just wanted to spice things up before the match."

The 22-year-old midfielder and Olympic captain faces a late fitness test on his injured hip but Uzbekistan will welcome back star striker Maksim Shatskikh, who was suspended for the Iran match.

Iraq scalp Australia

AFP, Bangkok



Australia were booed off the field with their Asian Cup hopes in tatters after a disastrous 3-1 defeat to Iraq here Friday.

The Socceroos fell behind after a 22nd-minute goalkeeping clanger by Mark Schwarzer, only to equalise through Mark Viduka but they were badly exposed defensively again for the Iraqis to wrap it up with two more goals.

The bumbling loss heaps further pressure on under-fire coach Graham Arnold, with chants of "Arnold out" from the travelling Australian fans.

Iraq now share the lead in Group A with Thailand, 2-0 winners over Oman Thursday, with the pair favourites to go into the quarterfinals after Monday's final pool games.

The Thais need only a point against Australia, while Iraq also only require a draw against Gulf rivals Oman to move into the last eight.

Australia, who again struggled for any semblance of the form they showed at last year's World Cup, must beat the Thais to stand any

chance of going through.

It was another night of humiliation for the one-time tournament favourites who needed a Tim Cahill stoppage-time goal to salvage a draw with Oman last Sunday.

Schwarzer badly misjudged a lofted long-range free kick from midfielder Nashat Akram midway through the opening half with calamitous results.

The Middlesbrough goalkeeper stayed on his line and was deceived by the flight and the close attention of Salih Sadir for the ball to sail past him into the net to give the Iraqis the crucial opening goal in stifling heat.

It was just the spur the Iraqis needed and it was like a hammer blow for the Australians, who spoke before the match of the importance of scoring the first goal.

The Socceroos offered little in attack in the opening 45 minutes with lone striker Viduka held in check and only coming close to scoring with a sizzling free kick in the 31st minute.

Frustrations boiled over in the trying conditions with the Australians receiving three yellow cards -- midfielder Jason Culina, defender Lucas Neill and midfielder Vince Grella in the opening term.

Grella may have been fortunate not to receive a second yellow when he appeared to push Younis Mahmoud to the ground, angered by what he perceived as the Iraqi skipper taking a dive.

Cahill came on for Brett Holman straight after half-time and his presence for a time galvanised the Australians and they equalised two minutes after the break with Brett Emerton's cross nodded home by Viduka for his ninth international goal.

But Iraq caught out the loose Australian defence again with Nashat's precise angled pass finding Hawar Mulla unmarked in the centre and he gave Schwarzer no chance to put his team 2-1 up on the hour.

Arnold brought on strikers Archie Thompson and John Aloisi for the last quarter of the match in a bid to salvage a point.

But substitute Karrar Jassim rubbed salt into Australia's wounds when he seized on Schwarzer's half-save off Mahdi Karim with four minutes left to kill off the Australians.

The final humiliation for Australia came in the dying seconds when West Ham's Neill was sent off for a second yellow card offence.

Arrest warrant for Tevez agent

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazil have issued a warrant for the arrest of Kia Joorabchian, the agent of Argentine footballer Carlos Tevez, and the former head of club Corinthians, on suspicion of money laundering, judicial sources said Friday.

The charges relate to the financing of the Corinthians football club in Sao Paulo.

Joorabchian, a Briton of Iranian origin who is the head of MSI, the company that holds the financial rights of Corinthians, is alleged to have been involved in money laundering with Iranian-born businessman Nojan Bedround and Russian investor Boris Berezovski.

MSI holds the contracts to footballers including West Ham striker Tevez, Liverpool midfielder Javier Mascherano and Argentine coach Daniel Passarella.

"The three men do not live in Brazil but they will be jailed if they return because of allegations of money laundering and criminal conspiracy against them," a legal source said.

Judge Martin De Sanctis has ordered the freezing of Corinthians assets which come from the MSI fund.

Bianchi moves to City

AFP, Manchester

Sven-Goran Eriksson made his first signing as manager of Manchester City on Friday when Reggina striker Rolando Bianchi joined the former England coach at Eastlands.

The Italian has moved for an undisclosed fee which the Serie A club had previously claimed to be 8.8 million pounds (18 million dollars).

Bianchi, 24 was the fourth highest scorer in Serie A last season with 18 goals, helping to keep Reggina in the top flight.

City, under former boss Stuart Pearce - now in charge of the England Under-21 side, finished just four points above the relegation zone last season in 14th place in the 20-team Premiership.

An ill-tempered European Under-21 Championship group

Sevilla borrow Boulharouz

AFP, London

Chelsea's Dutch defender Khalid Boulahrouz has been loaned to Spanish outfit Sevilla for a year, the Premiership club confirmed Friday.

Boulahrouz, 25, arrived at Stamford Bridge before the start of last season for approximately seven million pounds.

However he failed to see eye to eye with manager Jose Mourinho and this year made just four appearances for the London club.

Clijsters ties the knot

AFP, Bree, Belgium

Belgian former world number one Kim Clijsters has married American basketball player Brian Lynch in a civil ceremony in her home town here on Friday morning, ahead of the religious ceremony on Saturday.

"Kim Clijsters and Brian Lynch were married by mayor Jack Gabriels in the strictest privacy, in the presence of just both their families," town official Lidia Seerra told AFP.

"There were few people, but the parents of the young couple were present."

Clijsters' sister Elke and Brian's brother acted as witnesses.

The civil ceremony had been scheduled for Thursday evening but the mayor, fearing an influx of excited fans, announced that it was being postponed without saying when it would take place.

The 24-year-old Clijsters, who revealed on her website that she is expecting a baby, has been living with Lynch for the past two years. Lynch plays for the basketball team in Bree.

The couple plan to spend some time in the United States after the wedding.

The Belgian ace, who won 34 WTA singles titles in her career including the US Open in 2005, said that battling injuries and the constant effort to stay at the top had finally taken their toll and it was time to hang up her racket.

She retired from competition in May.

Cesc staying put

TIMES ONLINE



Cesc Fàbregas, the Arsenal and Spain midfielder, told Real Madrid late last night that he would not be joining them this summer. After a meeting with Arsène Wenger, the Arsenal manager, on Wednesday, Fàbregas decided to reject the advances of the Spanish champions and informed them of his decision yesterday.

Real believed that Fàbregas was unsettled and would contemplate a move away from the Emirates Stadium in the wake of Thierry Henry's 16 million pound transfer to Barcelona. But, in an interview with Marca, the Spanish radio station, the 20-year-old said of his conversation with Ramón Calderón, the Real president, and Pedrag Mijatovic, the sporting director: "I have talked with

them and they made a great effort to get me to sign. It was a very difficult decision for me but with Thierry Henry leaving I feel that I can't leave the club that has done so much for me."

Fàbregas has blossomed at the heart of the Arsenal midfield to such an extent that he was the club's player of the year last season and he is relishing taking centre stage after the departure of Henry. "I have a great responsibility this season and I can't wait to get started and start trying to win things," he said. "It made me very excited that a club as big as Madrid were interested in me and that made it a very difficult decision. It's a chance that doesn't come around very often but I am only 20 and I have to keep improving and I want to do that at Arsenal."

Fàbregas also offered encouragement on the future of Wenger, whose contract runs out at the end of

next season. Henry had cited the doubt over Wenger's future as a reason behind his own desire to move but Fàbre-gas said: "I have every confidence that the manager will sign a new deal."

Arsenal continued to plan for life after Henry by signing Bacary Sagna from Auxerre yesterday for a fee that is likely to rise to 8 million pounds. The 24-year-old defender signed a five-year contract and identified the prospect of working with Wenger as one of the main attractions of moving to North London.

"Arsène Wenger is an excellent manager with a fantastic record and I am really looking forward to working with him," Sagna said. "We have youth and the fact that no one really rates us means that maybe we can surprise people. The young players want to prove what they can do and I want to prove what I can do."

Serbia let off the hook



INTERNET, undated

Serbia have escaped a Euro 2008 points deduction following the racist abuse of England's black players at the countries' Under-21 match last month.

Instead, the Serbian FA has been handed a 16,000 pound fine for racist chanting of supporters and for their players' improper conduct.

England were themselves fined 2,000 pound for improper conduct as opposing players squared up in the tunnel after England's 2-0 win in Nijmegen.

An ill-tempered European Under-21 Championship group

game was marred when a number of Serbian fans aimed 'monkey' chants at several players, in particular Manchester City's Nedom Onuoha.

The referee briefly stopped the match while an announcement was made over the public address system asking them to stop.

"It was horrific, a bad moment, and it's not the first time it's happened in my career," said Onuoha after the match. "Hopefully in a few years it will have stopped."

UEFA have long promised to get tough in the fight against racism, but many consider the punishments handed out to offenders to be insufficient.

The largest fine handed out to a national association was to the

Spanish FA in 2004 - a 60,000-pound levy, again for the abuse of England players.

Some, including former England international Paul Parker, had suggested UEFA might dock points from the senior team's Euro 2008 qualifying campaign or force them to play matches behind closed doors, but European football's governing body have decided a relatively minor punishment will suffice.

There was no judgment on the alleged racist taunting of Justin Hoyte by a Serbian player in the tunnel bust-up.

Serbia have three days to lodge an appeal against the decision, while England have no right of appeal against their sanction.



PHOTO: AFP  
New Chelsea signing Florent Malouda (R) poses with his shirt as he shakes hands with manager Jose Mourinho during a press conference in Beverly Hills, California on Thursday.

Benitez betting on Babel

TIMES ONLINE



As a procurer of young talent, Rafael Benítez's record has been somewhat hit and miss since he took over as Liverpool manager three years ago.

Daniel Agger, the accomplished young Denmark defender, may be one of Benítez's better acquisitions, but the failures ring a little louder than the successes. Gabriel Paletta anyone?

Or how about Mark González, apparently so good that Benítez was willing to wait 12 months for the Chile winger to get a work permit but who has since been sent packing to Real Betis.

It is why Liverpool supporters might have greeted the news of Ryan Babel's arrival at Anfield with as great a degree of trepidation as expectation, especially in light of the fact that the club have paid 11.5 million pounds for the services of the 20-year-old Holland forward, who will put pen to paper on a five-year contract today.

There are many reasons for Liverpool fans to be optimistic, however, and that is because, for long stretches, Babel has been coveted by Arsène Wenger, a man whose eye for emerging talent is proven and remains largely unblemished.

Price, more than anything, may ultimately have prevented the Arsenal manager from challenging Liverpool for Babel's signature, but Wenger is a keen admirer of a player that Benítez hopes will develop into a world-beater for the club.

His country's star in the recent European Under-21 Championship, which Holland won, Babel has 14 full international caps and is fêted as one of the most promising young players in the Netherlands after exploding

on to the scene with Ajax.

Indeed, the biggest problem for Benítez may be where to play Babel. The Liverpool manager had identified the need for two wingers in the wake of the club's Champions League defeat by AC Milan in May, but in Babel and Yossi Benayoun, who has signed a four-year contract after his 5 million pounds move from West Ham United, the Spaniard has signed two players who cannot be classed as out and out wide-men.

Although Babel is said to be comfortable on either wing, the player's preferred position is up front, even though the jury is thought to be out on whether he can operate as an orthodox striker.

The player himself, though, appeared to shed some light on how he might be used yesterday after being told that he will probably compete with Fernando Torres, Dirk Kuyt, Peter Crouch, Andriy Voronin, Harry Kewell and Jermaine Pennant for a starting place.

"I was in Aruba at the end of last week when I was told to start thinking about Liverpool because a move could happen," Babel said. "I have met Rafael Benítez and my conversation with him was the moment I knew the deal would get done."

"He is like the ideal father-in-law. He has a lot of football knowhow and he told me that I would be challenging with six other players for four positions. I have a good feeling about things."

"I met Dirk Kuyt at training, who I knew from the national team. At that moment he did not feel like a rival but I suppose that is what will happen. It was very important how the coach spoke to me, how I would fit in his team. After that conversation I knew it was the right decision."

Meanwhile, Steve Finnan is poised to become the latest player to commit his long-term

future to Liverpool after Steven Gerrard, Jamie Carragher, Xabi Alonso, José Manuel Reina and Mohamed Sissoko. The Ireland defender has been offered a two-year contract with the option of an extra 12 months.

Jerzy Dudek has finally ended speculation about his future by joining Real Madrid on a free transfer. The Poland goalkeeper will serve as understudy to Iker Casillas at the Bernabéu.

Indianapolis struck off F1 menu

AFP, Indianapolis

The United States Grand Prix at Indianapolis was wiped off the 2008 Formula One schedule after eight years at the historic speedway circuit.

"After several discussions, Bernie Ecclestone and I were unable to agree how to keep Formula One in Indianapolis for the near term," Indy boss Tony George said.

"However, we have agreed to leave the door open for a potential future date."

"It has been a pleasure having the United States Grand Prix at Indianapolis, and I hope that as we approach our Centennial Era at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, an opportunity might present itself that would allow its return."

Relations between the two organisations were weakened in 2005 when tyre safety concerns forced the majority of teams to pull their cars out of the Grand Prix.

It is unknown whether another American venue will replace Indianapolis for the 2008 season.

British rookie sensation Lewis Hamilton won the 2007 event last month, his second Grand Prix win on his F1 debut season.



PHOTO: AFP  
(L) New Los Angeles Galaxy recruit David Beckham and his wife Victoria arrive at the Los Angeles airport on Thursday. (R) Beckham poses wearing his new jersey during a photocall for Adidas. LA Galaxy will debut their jerseys against Chelsea in a pre-season exhibition match on July 21