



PHOTO: AFP

Hordes of Iraqis throng the streets of Basra following their team's surprise triumph in the final of the Asian Cup over Saudi Arabia on Sunday.

Schuster desperate for Robben

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid coach Bernd Schuster admits he will breathe a little easier if the Primera Liga champions can tie up a deal for Chelsea winger Arjen Robben.

Madrid are looking to strengthen the left-hand side of their team ahead of the new season and have been chasing Robben, Jose Antonio Reyes and Royston Drenth for much of the summer.

While Reyes is now being tipped in the Spanish media to sign for Atletico Madrid, Schuster feels the acquisitions of Drenth and, in particular, Robben would be a major boost for his plans.

"I would be a lot more relaxed if they were here," the coach said.

"Getting Robben here is very important for us. That would allow Robinho and (Gonzalo) Higuain to be on the right. I want a lot of mobility there, similar to what (Zinedine) Zidane did.

"I am sure that we haven't closed our squad yet."

Schuster, who replaced title-winning coach Fabio Capello in the

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Adu close to Benfica

AFP, Lisbon

Freddy Adu, the most recognisable name in the Major League Soccer, was on Monday poised to sign a five year deal with Portuguese side Benfica.

The Ghana-born Adu, 18, was twice named an MLS All-Star - in 2004 and 2006 - helped DC United capture the 2004 MLS Cup during his rookie season.

According to press reports here Benfica have already paid out 1.5 million euros to recruit the United States international.

Benfica are also due to sign Argentina duo Angel Di Maria and Andres Diaz.

'Iraq belongs to everyone'

AFP, Jakarta



Influential Iraqi midfielder Nashat Akram says the inspiring Asian Cup victory by a team made up of Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish players shows what

unity can achieve in the tormented nation.

Nashat, who won the man of the match award as Iraq beat Saudi Arabia 1-0 in the final here Sunday to claim their first continental title, said the triumph sends a powerful message to the world.

The 23-year-old playmaker was at the heart of most of Iraq's attacks against the Saudis, capped a magnificent tournament with another impressive performance.

"We have delivered our message to the whole world," Nashat said Monday.

"The message is that there is only one Iraq. Iraq belongs to all its sects and its entire people.

"In our Iraq team we played with one unity regardless of our beliefs or sects and this is what should be the case back in Iraq."

It was a coaching triumph for Brazilian Jorvan Vieira, who has coached Arab clubs and international teams for more than 20 years, and successfully brought together the players to become the pride of all Iraq.

Nashat, along with man-of-the-tournament and striker Younis Mahmoud, were the standouts in the Iraqis' charge to the title against the triple champion Saudis.

Nashat, who played last season with Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab, said the final had a special atmosphere generated by 60,000 fans in Jakarta's pulsating Gelora Bung Karno Stadium.

"The game was very, very hard,"

he said. "The Saudis were also hard because this was the final and there was a different atmosphere.

"However, what we wanted before the game happened and we made all of our people happy and all the people who supported us.

"I'm extremely happy because this man-of-the-match award crowns not only my effort but all the efforts of my team-mates as well.

"This is the second time I have won the MVP (most valuable player) of the match and it goes to all my team-mates."

Iraq erupted in joy and celebratory gunfire on Sunday when the team lifted the trophy and united its bitterly divided communities in a rare moment of jubilation.

Thousands of Iraqis, including members of the security forces, defied a strict government ceasefire order to welcome the victory with an intense barrage of gunfire.

Pressure on Benitez

AFP, Liverpool



Rafael Benitez launches his fourth season in charge at Liverpool under

real pressure to deliver silverware to the Anfield trophy room.

The Spaniard has already proved his worth by steering the Merseyside club to two Champions League finals, one of which ended in triumph after a dramatic May night in Istanbul in 2005.

He has also lifted the FA Cup as well as taking Liverpool to the League Cup final.

Yet there is now a level of expectancy about Liverpool created by his eye-catching summer signings.

Despite occasional success in domestic and European knockout competitions, fans have been waiting for a league title since 1990.

They will believe that the arrival of Fernando Torres, Yossi Benayoun, Ryan Babel and Andriy

Voronin will give the side the fire-power and fluency needed to win the Premiership for the first time since it started.

Meanwhile, the club's billionaire American owners will be expecting a return on the 40 million pounds they have allowed Benitez to spend since losing to AC Milan in May's Champions League final in Athens.

Tom Hicks and George Gillett will be looking harder than anybody at Benitez and if Liverpool are not in the running for the title in the last couple of weeks of the season there will be major disappointment among the faithful.

Goals in the league have been hard to come by under Benitez hence the arrivals club record signing Torres and Voronin while Babel, who cost 11.5 million pounds from Ajax, and Benayoun will be expected to supply the ammunition.

Spanish international Torres cost 21 million pounds from Atletico Madrid and will be under pressure

to deliver from the start. He will not be allowed much time to get used to the Premiership and will be expected to get on the scoresheet in the first few games.

To be fair Liverpool's start is not the most demanding although their first home game is against Chelsea, who are determined to win back the title they lost to Manchester United last season.

Benitez's side launch their campaign at Aston Villa, who finished last season in the bottom half of the table, and face newly-promoted Sunderland, Derby and Birmingham before the end of September.

There is still room to improve the squad with Benitez still looking to strengthen his options at left-back before the transfer window shuts at the end of August.

Attempts to lure Gabriel Heinze from archrivals Manchester United have so far failed, despite meeting

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90 million Kaka bid?

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will later this week offer AC Milan 90 million euros (123 million US dollars) for the Italian side's Brazilian star Kaka, Spanish sports daily Marca reported Monday.

If the deal goes through it would be the most expensive transfer in football history.

The offer will be made "probably Wednesday or Thursday" in Milan during a meeting between officials of the two clubs which officially will discuss the possible transfer of Real Madrid forward Julio Baptista, the newspaper said.

"Real Madrid will launch a total offensive this week for Kaka," it said.

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon has put Kaka, who was inspirational in Milan's Champions League triumph last season, on the top of his wish list.

But the 25-year-old is under contract with AC Milan until June 2011 and he has said he is happy to stay at the Italian side.

"Real Madrid are a fantastic club, but money isn't everything," he told Italian news agency ANSA last week.

"I have also learned from friends who have left Milan how they deeply regretted doing so. I want to make history here," he added at the time.

The biggest transfer in football history so far was that of Zinedine Zidane when he signed for Real Madrid from Italian side Juventus in 2001 for 75 million euros.

Pele warns 'pop-star' Beckham

INTERNET, undated

Brazil legend Pele has urged David Beckham to stop being a "pop star" and start focussing on his football if he wants to succeed in the US.

The former England captain wants to raise the profile of the game in the States after signing a five-year contract with LA Galaxy, though his on-field impact has so far been limited by an ankle injury suffered during national team duty last month.

Like Beckham, Pele also played football in America as his illustrious career drew to a close. The three-time World Cup winner featured for the New York Cosmos in the old North American Soccer League during the 1970s.

He says the former England captain must ignore the glitz and glamour of Hollywood and concentrate solely on his football.

"David Beckham is more of a pop star than a player. From my experience with New York Cosmos, I would advise him to be very well prepared for the matches.

"I know the level of play in the league. It is well balanced, and the spectators will demand a lot from him as their star player. But when there's no training or practice, then he can stroll through Hollywood," added Pele.

Beckham has so far made just one substitute appearance for Galaxy in a friendly against Chelsea on July 21.

He faces a fitness test to determine whether he will travel with the rest of the squad to Texas for a SuperLiga match against FC Dallas on Tuesday night.

Van Persie guns down Inter

THE INDEPENDENT

Robin van Persie produced a moment of brilliance yesterday to fire Arsenal to victory over Internazionale to win the Emirates Cup.

The Gunners showed plenty of spirit and glimpses of the quality they will need in this season's title race during an entertaining encounter with the Italian champions. Just when the match seemed to be heading towards a draw, Van Persie - out since breaking a metatarsal in January - smashed home a winner following superb close control in the six-yard box.

As expected, Arsène Wenger made several changes from the starting team for Saturday's victory over Paris St-Germain. Inter, who were very disappointing against Valencia on Saturday, also rotated several of their players but offered little threat in the opening exchanges. Van Persie looked lively in attack for the Gunners, ably supported by Alexander Hleb.

On 20 minutes, a clever step-over from Hleb created a shooting chance just outside the box for Van Persie but Julio Cesar forced away his low effort. Marco Materazzi was then cautioned for a late challenge on Emmanuel Eboué as the Arsenal defender, playing on the wing, surged down the right flank.

Mathieu Flamini - who was on target against PSG - made the Inter

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An entertaining spectacle

AFP, Jakarta



The Asian Cup might have lacked star power but the region's top football competition nevertheless served up

entertaining and quality soccer, with an inspirational story to finish it off.

The three-week festival ended Sunday with Iraq beating Saudi Arabia 1-0 in a final few predicted as the war-torn country celebrated its greatest footballing achievement.

A gutsy South Korea took third place ahead of Japan, with the top three automatically qualifying for the 2011 Asian Cup in Qatar.

Yet sadness tinged the tournament with Iraq's amazing run

sparking big celebrations in the war-ravaged country only for insurgents to take advantage, detonating car bombs that killed more than 50 fans.

The championships produced 83 goals, some edge-of-the seat thrillers, and evidence that the game in Asia continues to make its mark on the global stage.

And in comparison to the 2004 finals in China when 17 players were sent off, the 2007 championships were a comparatively sedate affair with just six red cards in 32 games -- four of them in the third-placed play-off, of which three were given to Korea's coaching staff.

Surprisingly, few coaches were sacked with Malaysia's Norizan Bakar the only casualty so far, although the coaches of China, Iran and Australia could follow.

Iraqi coach Jorvan Vieira said he would resign after taking his side to the final while Pim Verbeek threw in the towel despite steering the Koreans to third.

While heavyweights Saudi Arabia making the final for a sixth time in their last seven attempts was a reasonable bet, few tipped Iraq to go so far.

Driven by a desire to bring some joy to their homeland, they proved an inspiration and their victory gave them confidence ahead of next year's qualifying for the 2010 World Cup.

After years of below-par performances Southeast Asian teams grabbed some of the limelight with minnows Vietnam upsetting the odds by making the quarterfinals.

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Chakvetadze downs Mirza



AFP, Stanford

Top-seeded Russian Anna Chakvetadze cruised past India's Sania Mirza 6-3, 6-2 here Sunday to capture her second WTA Tour title in as many weeks.

Chakvetadze had earned a three-set victory against Mirza in the semifinals en route to the title at Cincinnati last week, and Mirza was unable to improve on that result in this 600,000-dollar hardcourt tournament.

Chakvetadze, ranked eighth in the world, claimed her sixth career title and fourth title of the season,

after triumphs at Cincinnati, Hobart and s-Hertogenbosch.

Prior to Cincinnati, she won one of her two singles matches to help Russia top the United States in the semifinals of the Fed Cup in Vermont.

"I have to play only on hard courts in the United States," she said. "I still had some trouble in the first set with my serve. After this kind of thing I concentrated more on every point."

Mirza, playing in her first Tier II final, had upset three seeded opponents en route to the final, ousting number four Patty Schnyder, number six Tatiana Golovin and number eight Sybille Bammer.

Her wins over Golovin and Schnyder were her first over top-20

opponents in a 2007 season that has been disrupted by a knee injury that required surgery in March and sidelined her for more than two months.

"After I lost the first set she dominated," Mirza said. "She comes up with her best in the finals. I wasn't feeling it as well as I have. I was getting tentative and hoping she'd make mistakes.

"I didn't hit the ball as cleanly as I did the whole week."

But Chakvetadze said she thought Mirza was stronger than she was a week earlier.

"She had a great week," Chakvetadze said. "Compared to

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PHOTO: AFP

Russian starlet Anna Chakvetadze smiles as she poses with the winner's trophy of the Bank of the West Classic tennis tournament at Stanford University on Sunday.

Parading could be death-wish

AFP, Jakarta



Victorious skipper Younis Mahmoud wishes he could parade the Asian Cup trophy with his celebrating Iraqi people in Baghdad, but he fears he may

pay with his life.

Mahmoud's 71st-minute header realised Iraq's supreme sporting achievement with a 1-0 victory over Saudi Arabia in the Asian Cup final here on Sunday.

But the Qatari-based striker, who passionately led the Iraqi team to a first-ever continental title against crushing odds amid all the civil turmoil back home, cannot share the team's joy with his people.

In what is the accepted practice

elsewhere throughout the world, Mahmoud said there is no chance of showing off the Cup to the jubilant Iraqi fans.

"I wish I could go back to Baghdad to celebrate, but who will secure my life," man-of-the-tournament and joint leading scorer Mahmoud said.

"In Iraq you do not know who will kill you. If I get among the people, (team-mate) Nashat Akram, me, or any other player, nobody can hurt me or try to kill me, but the problem is with the American troops and the government.

"I don't like the American people to be angry with me but I wish the Americans hadn't invaded Iraq and I hope we will get rid of them very soon."

Gruesome modern-day realities have transcended Iraq's feel-good march to the title.

In a poignant moment at the post-match press conference Mahmoud revealed the team's resolution to win the final after a mother had dedicated her slain young son as a sacrifice to the Iraqi national team.

Mahmoud said the mother lost her 12-year-old son in a car bomb attack in Baghdad last week, one of over 50 people murdered after Iraq's semi-final victory against South Korea.

"One of the victims was a 12-year-old and when the child was laid in front of the mother she didn't weep," Mahmoud said.

"But she said 'I present my son as a sacrifice for the Iraqi national team'... so we had to win."

Coach Jorvan Vieira said the players and coaching staff had

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PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal forward Robin van Persie (L) shoots to score the winning goal in their Emirates Cup tie against Inter Milan at the Emirates Stadium in London on Sunday.