

Iraq denies sacking FA

Football

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's football governing body was not sacked under a decree that covered other sports, the government said on Wednesday in a move that could see them play its World Cup qualifier in Australia.

The Iraqi government said it never sacked the football federation and that it was also not covered by the "resolution 184" that dissolved the National Olympic Committee last week and sparked a controversy with FIFA.

FIFA had warned it would suspend Iraq from international competition for 12 months unless

Baghdad reinstated the Iraq Football Association by 1400GMT on Thursday.

The Iraqi team is currently in Australia preparing for their qualifier on Sunday.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's aide, Bassam al-Husseini, said he gave the national team will play Australia after Baghdad sent a letter to FIFA confirming that the federation had not been sacked.

The Iraqi Federation of Football is not covered by resolution 184 and continues to engage in internal and external activities until the holding of elections, "Husseini said.

The Iraqis arrived in Australia late Tuesday after a friendly in Thailand where the Asian champions lost 2-1 after news of the developments back

home broke.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter had warned that Iraq must back down from 'political interference' in its national football federation so the team can play their World Cup qualifier.

However, he also added that he had a 'good feeling' that Iraq will play their match in Brisbane on Sunday.

The game was put in jeopardy after the world governing body took note of Baghdad's sacking of its national Olympic committee and several other sporting bodies.

FIFA's executive committee had given the Baghdad government the opportunity to revoke its decree by Friday before slapping a suspension on Iraq.

interested in Ronaldo "if he decides one day" to leave England.

Ronaldo is under contract with the English titleholders until 2012.

The player himself has muddled the waters by failing to categorically deny that he might be in the running for a move after last week's Champions League win over Chelsea in Moscow.

He is currently with the rest of the Portugal squad at their Euro 2008 training camp and said earlier this week: "What the press speculate about goes over my head."

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was their number one summer target.

In a bid to take the heat out of the situation Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon declared that the Spanish champions did not want "to enter into conflict" with the European champions.

"We're not going to do anything against the wishes of a friend like Manchester," said Calderon as reported in the Spanish media.

"We're sorry that Manchester are unhappy, but Real have nothing to do with this affair."

Repeated reports over the past few weeks suggest Real have every intention of going for their man with a lucrative bid of 80 million euros.

Calderon added: "We know Manchester are not selling, so why would we persist? It's a problem between the player and the club."

According to the club's chief Real have only let it be known that they are

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Italy keeper Gianluigi Buffon detects a totally different mood in the Azzurri's camp approaching Euro 2008 compared to before the World Cup.

The Italians turned up in Germany in 2006 under the cloud of the Serie A corruption scandal in which Buffon's team Juventus was to suffer the most serious of consequences as the 'old lady' was relegated, though, he stayed loyal to them.

Two years on, with the World Cup safely on their sideboard, the team is preparing in complete serenity.

"The atmosphere is different," Buffon said at the national federation's training centre.

"I sense more support from the public. And there's more respect for the team."

"The only thing that has remained the same is the will to win."

Reflecting on their prospects the Juventus keeper added: "We're favourites, it's not going to be easy, but we're proud to have won over the respect of everyone. We're the team to beat."

"It's not going to be easy to repeat what we did in Germany, notably in defence with fellow World Cup winners Fabio Cannavaro, Marco Materazzi, Fabio Grosso and myself. Especially as the years are passing."

"But it's obvious, everyone wants to succeed."

Italy are in Group C, the group of death, with the team they beat in the final in Berlin in 2006, France, the Netherlands and Romania.

"It's hard, but that's also because we're in the group. We're calm, and we respect our rivals -- the Dutch and the French of course but also Romania who have strong players like (Adrian) Mutu (also a Juventus player).

"In some respects the Euro is harder than the World Cup."

Italy and France are old foes, clashing in Germany and again in their qualifying group for the Euro.

"It's become like a game of chess between us. The two sides try to search out the other's weakness."

Andrea Barzagli is set to sign for next season's UEFA Cup contenders Wolfsburg, according to German daily tabloid Bild on Wednesday.

The 27-year-old centre back will sign a three year contract with an annual salary of 2.1 million euros in a transfer worth between 12 and 14 million euros to his club Palermo, reports suggest.

Wolfsburg finished fifth in the Bundesliga last season to earn their place in the UEFA Cup.

Spain enter yet another major championship hoping that the class of 2008 can finally end the unenviable tag of being the great underachievers of international football.

Not since winning the European title in 1964 at home have the Spanish, despite their huge pool of talent, landed a senior title -- the closest they came was losing 2-0 to France in the 1984 European final.

So often have they approached a major finals with the epithet of being one of the favourites only to leave even without crumbs of comfort from the table that this time round expectations are at a minimum.

However, with a group comprising Russia, Sweden and titleholders Greece the Spanish under eccentric coach Luis Aragones should surely be eyeing a last eight place and from there in the lottery that is the knock-

out phase anything could happen.

Aragones -- who is taking charge of the Spaniards for the last time -- for one is certain that the Spanish have the potential to be crowned European champions, though, he couched it in his usual offbeat humour.

"Sure it's going to be easy for us," he was quoted on UEFA's website.

"All we have to do is beat Sweden, who historically have better results than us, down Greece who are the reigning champions and then Russia and all that will be easy."

"I'm no fortune teller but the message I want to put across is that we're capable of winning."

Aragones is no respecter of reputations as he showed by not selecting the iconic Raul in the squad, despite his pretty productive season as Real Madrid won the title while the coach plumped for relegated Real Zaragoza forward Sergio Garcia, who managed just four goals in the campaign.

"There's a debate because he (Raul) is a player in the media's eye," said Aragones, defending his decision to omit Raul.

Having out-foxed the home defence to beat Germany goalkeeper Jens Lehmann on 61 minutes, Bulyga struck again to leave the Arsenal man and his defenders red-faced.

"It is disappointing that we

allowed the lead to slip from our hands, you could clearly see the hard work from the training camp was missing," said Germany coach Joachim Loew whose squad spent last week training in the Spanish island of Majorca.

Real try to cool row

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid on Wednesday took steps to cool down the heated row that has blown up with Manchester United over their pursuit of Cristiano Ronaldo.

Late Tuesday United issued a hard hitting statement threatening to report Real to FIFA over their interest in the Portugal winger.

"We have watched with growing irritation the comments attributed to Real Madrid over their alleged desire to sign Cristiano," the United statement read.

"We will have no alternative but to report Real if it continues to behave in this totally unacceptable fashion."

United were irritated by comments from Real coach Bernd Schuster claiming the 23-year-old

was their number one summer target.

In a bid to take the heat out of the situation Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon declared that the Spanish champions did not want "to enter into conflict" with the European champions.

"We're not going to do anything against the wishes of a friend like Manchester," said Calderon as reported in the Spanish media.

"We're sorry that Manchester are unhappy, but Real have nothing to do with this affair."

Repeated reports over the past few weeks suggest Real have every intention of going for their man with a lucrative bid of 80 million euros.

Calderon added: "We know Manchester are not selling, so why would we persist? It's a problem between the player and the club."

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