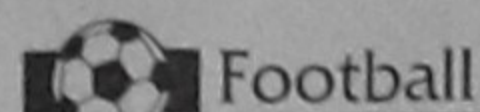


Iraq denies sacking FA



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 hoped 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 it continues to engage in internal and external activities until the holding of elections," Hussein 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.

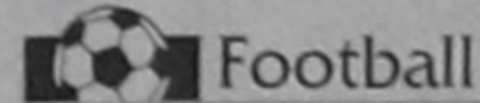
FIFA president Sepp Blatter had warned that Iraq must back down from 'political interference' in its national football federation so the team can play their World Cup qualifier.

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.

Real try to cool row



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 transfer 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

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 muddied 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.

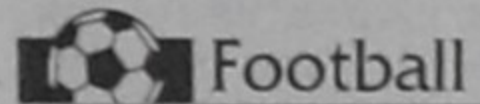
He is currently with the rest of the Portugal squad at their Euro 2008 training camp and said earlier this week: "What the press speculate about goes over my head."

"I have already been used to it for the past two years."

"I am calm. Everything's clear and I will repeat it once again so that the whole world understands: there will be news in two or three weeks."

"At the moment I am here, I am going to give my best and do the best possible in the European Championships."

Mourinho for Inter?



AFP, Rome

Former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho's long anticipated return to coaching looked set to be confirmed later on Tuesday as it was reported that Serie A champions Inter Milan were to let coach Roberto Mancini go.

Italian national press agency ANSA reported 43-year-old Mancini had held talks for 25 minutes with club president Massimo Moratti where the former Italy international striker had been told he was no longer wanted at the club, despite three successive titles.

According to the Italian media Mourinho, who has been kicking his heels in Portugal since he was sacked by Chelsea last September, would be

quickly named as his replacement.

However, Mancini's agent, Giorgio De Giorgis, said while he was pretty much certain Mancini's hugely successful spell at a domestic level was over, he could not confirm it definitively.

"I don't know anything," he told ANSA.

"I have not been able to sit down and talk calmly with Roberto."

"Is it finished? It appears more or less. But I cannot confirm that."

While Mourinho, nicknamed 'The Special One' for his guiding Porto to the Champions League title in 2004 and then Chelsea albeit an expensively assembled side to two Premiership titles, would not come cheap nor will the exit of Mancini, whose contract runs till 2012.

De Giorgis said that it would come as a huge surprise if Mancini had been sacked.

"This if it is true will purely be a decision taken by the club as he (Mancini) was not going anywhere (he has been linked to the Chelsea manager's job after Avram Grant was sacked at the weekend)," said De Giorgis.

"Mancini was very calm up till this morning (Tuesday). Then he read the newspapers, and when he read certain things about Mourinho arriving in his place we began to pose questions."

Mancini, who understudied Sven-Goran Eriksson when Lazio won the title in 2000, had announced after being knocked out by Liverpool in the last 16 of the Champions League that he was going to leave at the end of the season, though, he rescinded those words the next day.

Inter have not won the former European Cup/Champions League since 1965.

'Euro harder than WC'

AFP, Florence

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."

Barzagli set for Wolfsburg

AFP, Berlin

Italian World Cup winner 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.



PHOTO: AFP

Spain striker David Villa (L) challenges teammate Cesc Fabregas during a training session at the Las Rozas sport city in Madrid yesterday.

Spain to end chokers tag

AFP, Madrid



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 are 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.

"But the clubs have no influence over the choice of a player. I focus on the players, not the position of the team in the league."

"There are many other players who, when you look at the number of minutes played, have scored more than Raul and they haven't made the squad either."

However, it is not as if Aragones is bereft of frontline strikers as Fernando Torres is coming off the back of a stunning maiden season with Liverpool and David Villa -- who is being targeted by several top European clubs -- will also be a potent striking threat.

In midfield Aragones will be looking to Cesc Fabregas to replicate the playmaking skills that delighted for the most part Arsenal fans during the season while in defence the old warrior Carles Puyol will be called upon to step up to the plate.

All in all plenty for Spain to be confident about but there again it has all been heard and read about before and as someone once remarked 'I want actions and not words' and for the Spanish it is really time for them to do just that.

Belarus shock Germany

AFP, Germany

Second-half goals from striker Vitali Bulgya gave minnows Belarus a shock 2-2 draw on Tuesday against Germany -- one of the favourites for next month's Euro 2008.

A strike after just ten minutes from Germany forward Miroslav Klose -- his 39th goal in 75 internationals -- and a first-half own-goal gave the home side a commanding 2-0 lead at the break before Bulgya's double.

Having out-foxed the home defence to beat Germany goalkeeper Jens Lehmann on 61 minutes, Bulgya 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.

EURO 2008 FINAL SQUADS

AFP, undated

GROUP A

SWITZERLAND

Goalkeepers: Diego Benaglio (Wolfsburg/GER); Eldin Jakupovic (Grasshopper Zurich/SUI); Pascal Zuberbuehler (Neuchatel Xamax/SUI)

Defenders: Philipp Degen (Borussia Dortmund/GER); Johan Djourou (Arsenal/ENG); Stephane Grichting (Auxerre/FRA); Stephan Lichtsteiner (Lille/FRA); Ludovic Magnin (Stuttgart/GER); Patrick Muller (Lyon/FRA); Philippe Senderos (Arsenal/ENG); Christoph Spycher (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER)

Midfielders and attackers: Tranquillo Barnetta (Bayer Leverkusen/GER); Valon Behrami (Lazio/ITA); Ricardo Cabanas (Grasshopper Zurich/SUI); Eren Derdiyok (Basel/SUI); Gelson Fernandes (Man City/ENG); Alexander Frei (Borussia Dortmund/GER); Daniel Gyagax (Metz/FRA); Benjamin Huggel (Basel/SUI); Goekhan Inler (Udinese/ITA); Marco Streller (Basel/SUI); Johan Vonlanthen (Red Bull Salzburg/AUS); Hakan Yakin (Young Boys Bern/SUI)

CZECH REPUBLIC

Goalkeepers: Petr Cech (Chelsea/ENG); Jaromir Blazek (Nuremberg/GER); Daniel Zitka (Anderlecht/BEL)

Defenders: Zdenek Grygera (Juventus/ITA); Marek Jankulovski (AC Milan/ITA); Michal Kadlec (Sparta Prague); Radoslav Kovac (Spartak Moscow/RUS); Zdenek Pospech (FC Copenhagen/DEN); David Rozehnal (Lazio/ITA); Tomas Sivok (Sparta Prague); Tomas Ujfalus (Fiorentina/ITA)

Midfielders: Tomas Galasek (Nuremberg/GER); David Jarolim (SV Hamburg/GER); Marek Matejovsky (Reading/ENG); Jaroslav Plasil (Osasuna/ESP); Rudolf Skacel (Hertha Berlin/GER); Jan Polak (Anderlecht/BEL); Libor Sionko (FC Copenhagen/DEN);

Stanislav Vitek (Anderlecht/BEL)

Forwards: Milan Baros (Portsmouth/ENG); Martin Fenin (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER); Jan Koller (Nuremberg/GER); Vaclav Sverkos (Banik Ostrava).

PORTUGAL

Goalkeepers: Ricardo (Real Betis/ESP); Quim (Benfica), Rui Patricio (Sporting Lisbon)

Defenders: Ricardo Carvalho (Chelsea/ENG); Pepe (Real Madrid/ESP); Bruno Alves (FC Porto); Fernando Meira (VfB Stuttgart/GER); Jose Bosingwa (Chelsea/ENG); Paulo Ferreira (Chelsea/ENG); Miguel (Valencia/ESP); Jorge Ribeiro (Boavista)

Midfielders: Petit (Benfica); Miguel Veloso (Sporting Lisbon); Raul Meireles (FC Porto); Joao Moutinho (Sporting Lisbon); Deco (FC Barcelona/ESP)

Forwards: Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United/ENG); Nani (Manchester United/ENG); Ricardo Quaresma (FC Porto); Simao Sabrosa (Atletico Madrid/ESP); Nuno Gomes (Benfica); Hugo Almeida (Werder Bremen/GER); Helder Postiga (Panathinaikos/GRE)

TURKEY

Goalkeepers: Volkan Demirel (Fenerbahce); Rustu Recber (Besiktas); Tolga Zengin (Trabzonspor)

Defenders: Ugur Borai (Fenerbahce); Sabri Sarioglu; Servet Cetin; Hakan Kadir Balta; Emre Gungor (Galatasaray); Gokhan Zan (Besiktas); Emre Asik (Ankaraspor)

Midfielders: Mehmet Aurelio; Kazim Kazim (Fenerbahce); Mehmet Topal; Ayhan Akman; Arda Turan (Galatasaray); Emre Belozoglu (Newcastle United/ENG); Tümer Metin (Larissa/GRE); Hamit Altintop (Bayern Munich/GER); Tuncay Sanli (Middlesbrough/ENG)

Forwards: Gokdeniz Karadeniz (Rizin Kazan/RUS); Nihat Kahveci (Villareal/ESP); Semih Senturk (Fenerbahce); Mevlut Erdinc (Sochaux/FRA)

GROUP B

AUSTRIA

Goalkeepers: Juergen Macho (AEK Athens/GRE); Alexander Manninger (Siena/ITA); Ramazan Ozcan (Hoffenheim/GER)

Defenders: Gyorgy Garics (Napoli/ITA); Ronald Gercalici (Austria Vienna); Martin Hiden (Austria Carinthia); Markus Katzer (Rapid Vienna); Jurgen Patocka (Rapid Vienna); Emanuel Pogatz (Middlesbrough/ENG); Sebastian Proedl (Sturm Graz); Martin Stranzl (Spartak Moscow/RUS)

Midfielders: Rene Aufhauser (Salzburg); Christian Fuchs (Mattersburg); Andreas Ivanschitz (Panathinaikos/GRE); Umit Korkmaz (Rapid Vienna); Christoph Leitgeb (Salzburg); Juergen Saumel (Sturm Graz); Joachim Standfest (Austria Vienna); Ivica Vastic (Linz)

Strikers: Martin Hamrik (Werder Bremen/GER); Erwin Hoffer (Rapid Vienna); Roman Kienast (Ham-Kam/NOR); Roland Linz (Braga/POR)

GERMANY

Goalkeepers: Jens Lehmann (Arsenal/ENG); Robert Enke (Hanover 96); Rene Adler (Bayer Leverkusen)

Defenders: Christoph Metzelder (Real Madrid/ESP); Per Mertesacker (Werder Bremen); Philipp Lahm (Bayern Munich); Arne Friedrich (Hertha Berlin); Marcell Jansen (Bayern Munich); Clemens Fritz (Werder Bremen); Heiko Westermann (Schalke 04)

Midfielders: Michael Ballack (Chelsea/ENG); Thomas Hitzlsperger (VfB Stuttgart); Simon Rolfes (Bayer Leverkusen); Torsten Frings (Werder Bremen); Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern Munich); Piotr Trochowski (Hamburg); Tim Borowski (Werder Bremen); David Odonkor (Real Betis/ESP)

Forwards: Miroslav Klose (Bayern Munich); Lukas Podolski (Bayern Munich); Mario Gomez (VfB Stuttgart); Kevin Kuranyi (Schalke 04); Oliver Neuville (Borussia Moenchengladbach)

CROATIA

Goalkeepers: Stipe Pletikosa (Spartak Moscow/RUS); Vedran Runje (Lens/FRA); Mario Galinovic (Panathinaikos/GRE)

Defenders: Vedran Corluka (Manchester City/ENG); Dario Simic (AC Milan/ITA); Robert Kovac (Borussia Dortmund/GER); Josip Simunic (Hertha Berlin/GER); Dario Knezevic (Lyon/ITA); Hrvoje Vjecic (Tomsrk/RUS)

Midfielders: Danijel Pranjin (Heerenveen/NED); Nikola Pokrivac (Monaco/FRA); Niko Kovac (Salzburg/AUT); Luka Modric (Dinamo Zagreb/CRO); Jerko Leko (Monaco/FRA); Ognjen Vukojevic (Dinamo Zagreb/CRO); Dario Srna (Shakhtar Donetsk/UKR); Niko Kranjcar (Portsmouth/ENG); Ivan Rakitic (Schalke/GER)

Strikers: Miladin Petric (Borussia Dortmund/GER); Ivica Olca (Hamburg/GER); Igor Budan (Parma/ITA); Ivan Klasnic (Werder Bremen/GER); Nikola Kalinic (Hajduk Split/CRO)

POLAND

Goalkeepers: Artur Boruc (Celtic/SCO); Lukasz Fabianski (Arsenal/ENG); Tomasz Kuszczak (Manchester United/ENG)

Defenders: Jacek Bab (Austria Vienna/AUT); Pawel Golanski (Steaua Bucharest/ROM); Mariusz Jop (FK Moscow/RUS); Adam Kokoszka (Wisla Krakow); Marcin Wasilewski (Anderlecht/BEL); Jakub Wawrzyniak (Legia Warsaw); Michal Zewlakow (Olympiakos/GRE)

Midfielders: Jakub Blaszczykowski (Borussia Dortmund/GER); Dariusz Dudka (Wisla Krakow); Lukasz Gargula (GKS Belchatow); Roger Guerreiro (Legia Warsaw); Jacek Krzynowek (VfL Wolfsburg/GER); Mariusz Lewandowski (Shakhtar Donetsk/UKR); Rafal Murawski (Lech Poznan); Michal Pazdan (Gornik Zabrze)

Forwards: Wojciech Lobotzinski (Wisla Krakow); Marek Saganowski (Southampton/ENG); Euzebiusz Smolarek (Racing

Santander/ESP); Tomasz Zahorski (Gornik Zabrze); Maciej Zurawski (AE Larissa/GRE)

GROUP C

NETHERLANDS

Goalkeepers: Edwin van der Sar (Manchester United/ENG); Maarten Stekelenburg (Ajax); Henk Timmer (Feyenoord)

Defenders: Wilfred Bouma (Aston Villa/ENG); Tim de Cler (Feyenoord); John Heitinga (Ajax); Joris Mathijsen (SV Hamburg/GER); Mario Melchiot (Wigan Athletic/ENG); Andre Ooijer (Blackburn Rovers/ENG)

Midfielders: Ibrahim Afellay (PSV Eindhoven); Giovanni van Bronckhorst (Feyenoord); Orlando Engelaar (FC Twente); Nigel de Jong (SV Hamburg/GER); Wesley Sneijder (Real Madrid/ESP); Rafael van der Vaart (SV Hamburg); Demy de Zeeuw (AZ Alkmaar)

Strikers: Ryan Babel (Liverpool/ENG); Klaas-Jan Huntelaar (Ajax); Dirk Kuyt (Liverpool/ENG); Ruud van Nistelrooy (Real Madrid/ESP); Robin van Persie (Arsenal/ENG); Arjen Robben (Real Madrid/ESP); Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink (Celtic/SCO)

ITALY

Goalkeepers: Marco Amelia (Livorno); Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus); Morgan De Sanctis (Sevilla/ESP)

Defenders: Fabio Cannavaro (Real Madrid); Andrea Barzagli (Palermo); Giorgio Chiellini (Juventus); Fabio Grosso (Lyon/FRA); Marco Materazzi (Inter Milan); Christian Panucci (AS Roma); Gianluca Zambrotta (Barcelona)

Midfielders: Massimo Ambrosini (AC Milan); Alberto Aquilani (AS Rome); Mauro Camoranesi (Juventus); Daniele De Rossi (AS Roma); Gennaro Gattuso (AC Milan); Simone Perrotta (AS Roma); Andrea Pirlo (AC Milan)

Strikers: Marco Borriello (Genoa); Antonio Cassano (Sampdoria); Antonio Di Natale (Udinese);

Alessandro Del Piero (Juventus); Fabio Quagliarella (Udinese); Luca Toni (Bayern/GER)

FRANCE

Goalkeepers: Gregory Coupet (Lyon); Sebastien Frey (Fiorentina/ITA); Steve Mandanda (Marseille)

Defenders: Eric Abidal (Barcelona/ESP); Patrice Evra (Manchester United/ENG); William Gallas (Arsenal/ENG); Willy Sagnol (Bayern Munich/GER); Lilian Thuram (Barcelona/ESP); Francois Clerc (Lyon); Sebastien Squillaci (Lyon); Jean-Alain Boumsong (Lyon)

Midfielders: Lassana Diarra (Portsmouth/ENG); Claude Makelele (Chelsea/ENG); Jeremy Toulalan (Lyon); Patrick Vieira (Inter Milan/ITA)

Forwards: Nicolas Anelka (Chelsea/ENG); Thierry Henry (Barcelona/ESP); Florent Malouda (Chelsea/ENG); Franck Ribery (Bayern Munich/GER); Samir Nasri (Marseille); Karim Benzema (Lyon); Sidney Govou (Lyon); Bafetimbi Gomis (St Etienne)

ROMANIA

Goalkeepers: Bogdan Lobont (Dinamo Bucharest); Marius Popa (Poli Timisoara); Eduard Stanciolu (CFR Cluj)

Defenders: Cosmin Contra (Getafe/ESP); Gabriel Tamas (Auxerre/FRA); Dorin Goian (Steaua Bucharest); Cristian Chivu (Inter Milan/ITA); Razvan Rat (Sakhtar Donetsk/RUS); Sorin Ghionea (Steaua Bucharest); Cristian Sapunaru (Rapid Bucharest); Stefan Radu (Lazio Rome/ITA); Cosmin Moti (Dinamo Bucharest)

Midfielders: Florentin Petre (CSKA Sofia/BUL); Razvan Cocis (Lokomotiv Moscow/RUS); Mirel Radoi (Steaua Bucharest); Nicolae Dica (Steaua Bucharest); Paul Codrea (Sienna/ITA); Banel Nicolita (Steaua Bucharest); Adrian Cristea (Dinamo Bucharest)

Strikers: Adrian Mutu (Fiorentina/ITA); Ciprian Marica (Stuttgart/GER); Daniel Niculae (Auxerre/FRA); Marius Niculae (Inverness/SCO)

GROUP D

GREECE

Goalkeepers: Antonis Nikopolidis (Olympiakos Piraeus); Alexandros Tzorvas (OFI Crete); Costas Halkias (Aris Salonica)

Defenders: Lukas Vyntra and Ioannis Goumas (Panathinaikos Athens); Traianos Dellas and Socrates Papastathopoulos (AEK Athens); Paraskevas Antzas; Christos Patsazoglou (Olympiakos); Vasilis Torosidis (Aetleto Madrid/ESP); Sotiris Kyrgiakos (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER)

Midfielders: Costas Katsouranis (Benfica/POR); Alexandros Tziolis (Panathinaikos); Nikos Spyropoulos (Panathinaikos); Georgios Karagounis (Panathinaikos); Stelios Giannakopoulos (Bolton/ENG); Angelos Basinas (Real Mallorca/ESP); Ioannis Amanatidis (Eintracht Frankfurt/GER)