

Karimi restored after President's intervention

AFP, Tehran

Iranian football star Ali Karimi has been reinstated in the national squad after intervention from no less than President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the grandson of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, media reported Sunday.

Karimi, a former Bayern Munich midfielder nicknamed the "Asian Maradona", had been dropped after launching a bitter attack on the Iranian football federation which he accused of having no planning.

But demands from football fan Ahmadinejad and Khomeini's most prominent living descendant, his grandson Hassan Khomeini, have prompted the federation to reverse its decision, the ISNA news agency reported.

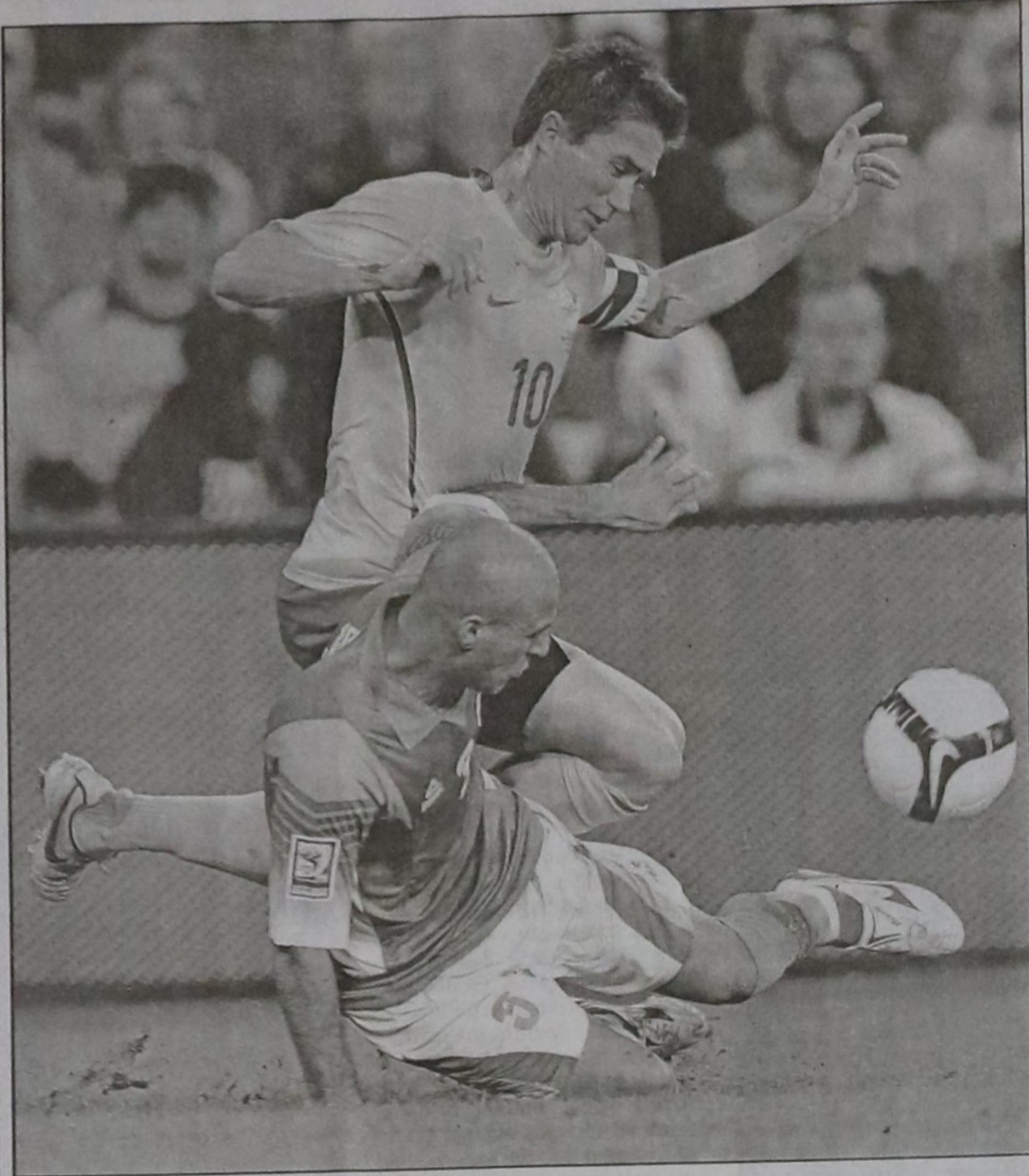
The tumult comes ahead of Iran's World Cup qualifier against the United Arab Emirates in Tehran on Monday, a must win game for the Team Melli after a sluggish start to its campaign.

Karimi is unlikely to play as he is injured but national coach Ali Daei has said he will be welcomed back into the squad.

"The federation has definitely pardoned Ali Karimi. Whether he is part of the team depends on coaching decisions," ISNA quoted Iranian football federation official Mehdi Taj as saying.

Ahmadinejad gave the order on Friday after he visited the team's training camp.

Karimi, who currently plays for Al-Qatar had said: "The Iranian football federation is a federation without any appropriate plans and we are witnessing that Iranian football is moving backwards."



Australia forward Harry Kewell (top) is slide-tackled by Iraq's Basem Abbas Gatea during their World Cup qualifying match in Brisbane yesterday.

Socceroos edge Iraq.

AFP, Brisbane



Harry Kewell scored another of his big-match goals to unlock Iraq and edge Australia closer to the final phase of World Cup qualifying here Sunday with a 1-0 win.

Kewell, 29, whose goal against Croatia lifted Australia into the second round of the 2006 World Cup finals, grabbed the winner two minutes into the second half after the home side had ridden their luck in the opening spell.

"I think we rode our luck. Iraq created quite a few chances today and a couple of balls went their way but again we had a great keeper (Mark Schwarzer) who stopped them," Kewell said.

Skipper Kewell eased Australia's anxieties with a well-taken header, outjumping his marker Abdul Amir Haidar to nod home Brett Emerton's cross from the right.

It was the 10th goal in 32 international appearances for Kewell, who is emerging from a couple of injury-blighted seasons.

Kewell was taken off with 13 minutes left to rapturous applause from the home crowd.

Iraq came close to grabbing a draw in the final 10 minutes, with Ali Hussein Rehema and Mulla Mohammed Hawar denied by last-

ditch saves from Schwarzer.

"Today was not what we deserved. I am very happy with the three points but we gave too many chances away. We were lucky in that situation, so overall I am sure we can play much better," Australia coach Pim Verbeek said.

Asian champions Iraq did not even know they would be playing the Australians until FIFA reversed a decision on Thursday to suspend them from competition over political interference from their government.

"Of course, it affected our players a lot, but we always play under pressure and we are the only football team in the world that plays outside of its country," Iraq coach Adnan Hamad said.

Australia have seven points from their three qualifiers and have not conceded a goal, while Iraq have just one point. Verbeek believes 10 points will be enough to advance to final qualifying.

Sunday's defeat has all but killed off Iraq's chances of reaching the final phase of qualifying with three games left in the group.

"My team tried to win so we could get a second chance in the World Cup qualifiers, but there's still a chance for the Iraqi team and I have faith in my team," Hamad said.

The victory has put Australia in the box seat to advance when they play their return World Cup quali-

fier against Iraq in Dubai next weekend.

"It's going to be great next week. It's going to be difficult with the heat, but we are well prepared, we know what we're going to deal with because we've been in Asia so we are going to be well equipped," Kewell said.

Iraq had three outstanding chances in the first half and Australia were fortunate not to concede a goal for the first time in three qualifying games.

Emad Mohammed rattled the bar in the fifth minute after goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer had punched clear a corner.

Emad later found himself unmarked in the box after sloppy Australian marking but his shot was deflected for a corner by Schwarzer's leg in the 26th minute.

And skipper Younis Mahmoud had a free header in the six-yard box, the chance going wide of Schwarzer's right post.

Kewell came in for special attention from the Iraqi defence and he was fouled three times, two of the offences leading to yellow cards for defenders Rehema and Haidar.

The Iraqis, like they did in their 3-1 win at last year's Asian Cup, frustrated the Australians with their stoppages during play and several times Socceroo players lost their cool, remonstrating with Uzbekistan referee Ravshan Irmatov.

Glazers won't let C'Ron go

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson believes Manchester United's American owners would do anything in their power to keep Cristiano Ronaldo at Old Trafford.

Ferguson has spoken to the Glazer family about Real Madrid's attempt to sign Ronaldo, a transfer saga that has turned increasingly spiteful in recent weeks.

The United boss is furious that Real have so publicly tried to unsettle the Portugal winger. United have even threatened to report Real to FIFA, a move which prompted the Spanish champions to back off, but Ferguson is relieved to hear the Glazers back his hardline stance.

"I've had a couple of meetings with the Glazers. Their attitude is, 'To hell with them'. They'd sit a player in the stand, I'm telling you, absolutely no doubt about it, just to prove a point. Not to give in to these people," Ferguson said.

"They've got balls, I can tell you. I've been delighted with them in that respect."

"They've been good to this club, believe me. They have been brilliant owners."

Ronaldo, meanwhile, said that he intends to make a decision on his future in the coming days.

"There'll be news shortly. I'll make a decision on my future in two or three days," the told journalists after Portugal's 2-0 Euro 2008 warm-up win over Georgia on Saturday night.

The Portuguese star leaves with his national team for Switzerland on Sunday for the European championships which get underway on June 7.

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Hiddink rules out Chelsea

AFP, London

Gus Hiddink insisted Sunday there was no chance of him leaving Russia to take charge of Chelsea.

Hiddink has been linked to the Stamford Bridge hotseat for the last year and the speculation intensified when Avram Grant was sacked last month.

The Dutchman has yet to sign a new contract with Russia but he ruled out a move to the Premier League club by revealing he has agreed to stay on until after the 2010 World Cup.

"The only contact I have had with Chelsea has been with (Roman) Abramovich about the development of Russian football."

Hiddink hinted at the reason he isn't keen to join Chelsea when he described the intense pressure put on managers there to win trophies every year.

"If they did not put so much pressure to get two or three cups every year, I would imagine they would start to play even better," he said.

Hiddink believes Rijkaard would be the ideal man to deliver Roman Abramovich's desire for entertainment, as well as winning football.

"He could fit very well in this philosophy. He is very open person to the people he is working closely with," he said.

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Babel out of Euro

AFP, Hoenderloo

Striker Ryan Babel has been ruled out of the Euro 2008 tournament starting next week after sustaining an injury in training, Dutch football officials said on Saturday.

The Liverpool forward is thought to have ruptured his Achilles' tendon.

Coach Marco van Basten named defender Khalid Boulahrouz of Spanish outfit Sevilla as the youngster's replacement.

Holland -- who won the tournament 20 years ago -- open their Euro 2008 campaign against Italy on June 9 and will play France four days later.

Zambrotta joins Milan

AFP, Rome

Italian fullback Gianluca Zambrotta, who played at Barcelona for two seasons, has joined AC Milan, the Italian first division club said on Saturday, without giving further contract details.

The 31-year-old Zambrotta therefore returns to the Serie A where he excelled at Bari (1997-1999) and then particularly at Juventus (1999-2006).

He left the Turin club in the summer of 2006 for Barcelona following the match-fixing scandal which had rocked Italian football.

Zambrotta was also crowned a World Cup winner with Italy in 2006 and has played 71 times for his country, scoring two goals. On Monday he will fly with the Italian team to Austria for the June 7 to 29 Euro 2008 finals.

Zambrotta's arrival at AC Milan will compensate for the departure of two fullbacks, Brazilians Cafu and Serginho.

Eto'o rebounds strongly

AFP, Johannesburg



African superstar Samuel Eto'o overcame an assault claim to score as Cameroon opened their challenge for a record sixth World Cup appearance with a 2-0 win over Cape Verde Islands Saturday.

Barcelona striker Eto'o converted a penalty 10 minutes into the second half in Yaounde to complete a comfortable triumph set up by an early goal from veteran defender Rigobert Song.

A local radio reporter accused three-time African Footballer of the Year Eto'o of head butting him Friday after tempers flared over limited media access to the 'Indomitable Lions'.

Cameroon competed at the World Cup in 1982, 1990, when they became the first African quarter-finalists, 1994, 1998 and 2002 and are poised to dominate Group 1 in the second qualifying phase for the 2010 tournament in South Africa.

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Robinho lifts Brazil

AFP, Seattle

Robinho's second-half strike lifted Brazil to a 3-2 victory over Canada here Saturday in a friendly tuneup for their upcoming qualifiers for the 2010 World Cup.

Robinho scored in the 63rd minute to break a 2-2 deadlock.

With the score knotted at 2-2, Canadian midfielder Julian De Guzman tried pass the ball back from just short of midfield, but his attempt sailed behind his intended target.

Robinho took it from there, collecting the ball, dribbling past goalkeeper Pat Onstad and drilling the ball into the back of the net.

De Guzman's 56th-minute goal had evened the match at 2-2.

Diego had opened the scoring for Brazil in the fourth minute, and Canada's Rob Friend equalized in the 11th. Luis Fabiano had put Brazil back in front in the 45th.

Despite De Guzman's one miscue, Canada coach Dale Mitchell had praise for the player.

"I thought he had an excellent game," Mitchell said. "He does a lot of work in midfield, he can distribute the ball, scored a good goal, perhaps could have had another one in the first half on his left foot."

"A mistake like that can happen to anybody, but, in general, another excellent performance from Julian De Guzman."

Brazilian coach Dunga credited both teams for a tightly contested match.

"It was a tough game," Dunga said. "We knew Canada is a very disciplined team. They have two or three plays that they repeat to perfection. It was a difficult game and a good test. Good preparation for Brazil."

The victory was a triumphant start for Brazil in their brief US tour, which will include a match against Venezuela in Foxboro, Massachusetts, on June 6.

It was also the first victory for Brazil against Canada in three meetings between the two countries.

In the Copa Confederaciones in 2001, they played to a goalless draw, and the drew 1-1 in a friendly at Edmonton, Canada, in 1994.

French stars play for Karembeu

AFP, Noumea

Members of France's World Cup-winning 1998 squad including Zinedine Zidane reunited in New Caledonia at the weekend, thrilling a crowd of 10,000 with an easy 8-2 win over a team of Pacific stars.

Zidane, a three-time world footballer of the year, scored twice to spur Les Bleus to victory in Noumea on Saturday over the locals led by former French star and hometown hero Christian Karembeu, whose career was being celebrated.

"It was important for us to be here for Christian because he deserves this. He's truly a great guy -- even if we're really far from home, we did it for him," Zidane said.

Karembeu, 37, who retired in October 2005, told the cheering crowd: "Tonight, New Caledonia is the world champion!"

Also making the trip were Robert Pires, Bixente Lizarazu, Frank Leboeuf and Youri Djorkaeff.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter was in the stands for Saturday night's match.

Romania impress

AFP, Paris

Four-goal Romania were the most impressive of a slew of Euro 2008 qualifiers Saturday as many of the top sides qualified for next month's finals went through their paces in warm-up games.

While 2000 champions France laboured to a goalless home draw with Paraguay the Romanians blasted four goals without reply against hapless Montenegro.

Both the French and Romania will meet up in the finals as they are in the Group of Death along with 1988 continental kings Holland and world champions Italy, a group where the least slip-up is likely to be punished with elimination.

The Italians did not fluff their lines in their 3-1 win on Friday over Belgium with Antonio Di Natale twice on target along with Mauro Camoranesi.

France, on the other hand, drew a blank in Toulouse as they failed to break down a tough Paraguayan side in a match which drew historic

parallels with the 1998 World Cup.

On that occasion, it was Laurent Blanc who saved the day for Les Bleus with a late goal for the hosts in a second-round encounter which paved the way for ultimate glory, with the Italians dispatched along the way.

On Saturday nobody was willing or able to step into the goalkeeping shoes of Blanc as Thierry Henry and Karim Benzema drew a blank.

"There were some good points and some less good points," said coach Raymond Domenech. "The important thing is the squad players got some match minutes."

Yet France, who lost Patrick Vieira to a thigh injury beforehand -- he will miss the start of the Euro -- were far from impressive as they failed to breach the Paraguayan wall which was even more solid than the 1998 variant.

Domenech took off Franck Ribery at the break for another striker in Sidney Govou and also withdrew Henry to field newcomer Bafetimbi Gomis, two goals on his debut in midweek against Ecuador.

But all to no avail as Govou and Benzema could go no closer than shave the post.

In other games, highly-fancied

Portugal scored a 2-0 home success over Georgia in Visou courtesy of first half goals from Joao Moutinho and Simao Sabrosa, efforts which prompted coach Luiz Felipe Scolari to ring the changes after the interval as he replaced ten players, including Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo, who gave way to club colleague Nani.

In the late match, Spain had a 2-1 victory over visitors Peru in Huelva.

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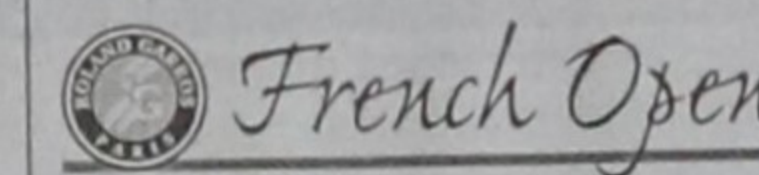
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Serb pair cruises



AFP, Paris

Serb pair Ana Ivanovic and Jelena Jankovic are on a French Open collision course after both notched up comfortable wins on Sunday to reach the quarterfinals.

Second seed Ivanovic blanked Petra Cetkovska of the Czech Republic 6-0, 6-0 while third seed Jankovic outplayed Agnieszka Radwanska of Poland 6-3, 7-6 (7/3).

One more win for each and they will face off against each other in the semifinals.

The Belgrade pair are both seeking their country's first Grand Slam title in women's tennis on the back of Novak Djokovic's breakthrough win for the men at the Australian Open in January.

The 20-year-old Ivanovic, who is starting to rival Maria Sharapova in the glamour stakes, won at a center in a 54-minute long mismatch to underline her potential winner status.

In four straight sets wins so far, the Belgrade beauty has dropped just 15 games as she bids to go one better than last year in Paris where she lost badly to the now retired Justine Henin in the final.

"It was much harder than it actually looked," she said.

"I played almost without a mistake. She had a lot of chances, but I stepped up and I was really playing my game and making so few unforced errors. I feel very confident going into the next round."

Ivanovic will play either Patty Schnyder of Switzerland or Katarina Srebotnik of Slovenia in the quarterfinals.

She is one of three players who can dislodge Sharapova from the world No. 1 spot in Paris the others being fellow Serb Jankovic and Svetlana Kuznetsova of Russia.

That situation came about following the sudden retirement of Henin who had enjoyed a healthy lead atop the rankings before she decided that she had had enough of competitive tennis just short of her 26th birthday.

Both Sharapova and fourth-seeded Kuznetsova play their fourth round ties on Monday.

Third seeded Jankovic was too solid in the end for Polish youngster Radwanska, but she again had trouble with pain in her right arm and shoulder brought on, she says,

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