

UEFA may lift Atletico ban

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid's Champions League tie against Liverpool may finally go ahead at their Vicente Calderon stadium next Wednesday as originally planned, Spanish media reported.

UEFA on Tuesday ordered Atletico to play their next two European matches at a stadium at least 300 kilometres (200 miles) from Madrid as punishment for crowd disturbances and racist insults against Marseille players during a Champions League match on October 1.

But Spanish sports daily Mundo Deportivo reported on its web site that European football's governing body was poised to announce that the match could go ahead in Madrid after all because of the logistical difficulty of staging it elsewhere at such short notice.

UEFA spokesman William Gaillard, asked about the reports by Spanish public radio RNE, said a decision on the game's venue would be made Thursday.

"We still have not made any decision regarding where the Atletico-Liverpool match will be held," he said.

"We will make the security of the public and the teams our maximum priority," he added.

Atletico's Mexican coach Javier Aguirre said he expected UEFA would suspend its sanction against the club and allow the match to go ahead at Vicente Calderon stadium.

"That seems to me to be the most reasonable to avoid problems with the movement of supporters and for all that organising a match in so little time implies," he told Spanish media.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez has said the late change in venue for the match against Atletico was unfair amid reports that over 3,000 supporters of the English side have already bought plane tickets to go to Madrid.

Atletico and Liverpool are joint leaders in Group D of the Champions League having both won their opening two matches.

Becks pays tribute to Sir Bobby

AFP, Minsk

David Beckham celebrated overtaking Sir Bobby Charlton to become England's third most capped player by paying tribute to the influence the Manchester United and England legend has had on his career.

"Without a doubt it means a lot," Beckham said after winning his 107th cap -- one more than Charlton managed -- with an appearance as a late substitute in the 3-1 win over Belarus here on Wednesday.

"Sir Bobby Charlton was a hero of my dad's and also of mine. I went to his soccer school when I was a boy. With him being a Manchester United legend I'm very honoured to be above him in the list and as close to him as I am."

One more appearance -- possibly in a friendly in Germany next month -- would see the 33-year-old Beckham equal 1966 captain Bobby Moore's tally of 108 caps, the highest total by an outfield player.

Beckham however still has some way to go to match former goalkeeper Peter Shilton's record of 125 appearances for England, although he will almost certainly do it if he achieves his ambition of staying in the squad until the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Most pundits see that as unlikely but Beckham has defied the odds before, most notably by coming back after being dropped at the start of Steve McClaren's reign in the aftermath of the last World Cup.

Kennedy cements place

AFP, Sydney

Josh Kennedy said Thursday his performance in Australia's crushing victory over Qatar had helped him cement the place he took from injured Mark Viduka.

The 1.94 metre (6 foot, 4 inch) Karlsruhe target man, who is thriving under coach Pim Verbeek, scored one goal and had a hand in two others in his team's 4-0 drubbing of Qatar.

The victory means Australia top their World Cup qualifying group. Kennedy came into the squad after an Achilles tendon injury put Newcastle United striker Viduka out of action.

Hitting the back of the net against Qatar in Brisbane means the 26-year-old has now scored five goals in nine games for the Socceroos.

"Every game I play in the Aussie team is a big step in consolidating that striker position for me and obviously the better performances and more goals can only help me in the future," Kennedy said Thursday.



Spanish midfielder Andres Iniesta celebrates after scoring a goal against Belgium during their 2010 World Cup qualifier in Brussels on Wednesday. Spain won 2-1 to maintain their all-win record in the qualifiers.

Top teams avoid trouble

AFP, Paris

The established order was respected in Europe on Wednesday night as top nations Italy, England, Germany and Spain all claimed victories to round off the year's 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

England had the most to smile about as their 3-1 victory in Belarus meant they had won four matches out of four, while Germany beat Wales 1-0, world champions Italy had a 2-1 win over Montenegro, and European champions Spain won 2-1 in Belgium.

On a worse note for Spain and his Liverpool club, Fernando Torres suffered a torn muscle in his thigh after being taken off in the match in Brussels.

Spain team doctor Oscar Celada said on Spanish television: "He has intense pain in the back part of the thigh. It is difficult to diagnose now exactly the extent, if it is a question of a strain or a small tear. If it is a

strain then he could be out for about a week."

The disciplined regime of Fabio Capello has spelt an unblemished reign at the helm of England so far, a far cry from the previous tenure of Steve McClaren, who was a great number two under Sven-Goran Eriksson but had problems coming into the hotseat and failed to get qualification for Euro 2008.

Capello said he was delighted with the performance lit up by a Wayne Rooney double and Steven Gerrard's opener.

"I am very happy because as I said before the game it was a very important game for us."

"If we want to win, we have to play like a team, not like single players. It is very important and tonight I saw one team."

"There is no secret -- it is about work, creating a group, creating the mentality and the confidence. This is very important because the players are very good players."

The win left England five points clear of Croatia at the top of the group, but Capello was taking nothing for granted in the wake of

England's failure to reach Euro 2008.

No more qualifiers till the spring means players can concentrate on club football, have a Christmas break, then get back into World Cup action on March 28, though a few nations have games in February.

Rio Ferdinand, who captained the side in the absence of the injured John Terry, added: "The half-time talk was quite simple. He said push up from the back and keep competing."

Joachim Loew's Germany side took a sizeable step towards claiming the single guaranteed place at South Africa 2010 from Group Four with three more points against a spirited Welsh side.

Winger Piotr Trochowski unleashed a superb second-half strike to seal the 1-0 win to put them four points clear.

Their third win from four qualifying games means Germany are now on ten points with Russia - who beat Finland 3-0 in Moscow on Wednesday - and plucky Wales lagging behind on six each.

Alberto Aquilani netted a brace

as unconvincing Italy edged out Montenegro 2-1 in Group Eight.

AS Roma striker Mirko Vucinic made a goalscoring return to Lecce, where he played for five years but he left disappointed as UEFA's newest nation lost their first ever competitive away match.

It means Italy remain unbeaten in control of the group with 10 points from four games but once again they failed to set pulses racing and it was only a wildly deflected shot that won the match.

Spanish striker David Villa, who hit a late winner in their 2-1 win against Belgium, was delighted with their victory in Brussels. "This victory was very important and was a serious test for us. We absolutely just had to get the three points," Villa said.

And on his goal, his 23rd which put him level with the same haul for Spain as Real Madrid legend Alfredo Di Stefano, Villa added: "These types of statistics are always nice to know. But I think the main thing was that the goal meant we earned three points against a very solid team."

WORLD CUP 2010 QUALIFYING RESULTS

EUROPEAN ZONE

Group 1
At Ta' Qali, Malta
Malta 0 Hungary 1 (Torhelle 23)
At Lisbon
Portugal 0 Albania 0

Group 2
At Riga
Latvia 1 (Kolesnichenko 89) Israel 1 (Benayoun 50)
At Piraeus, Greece
Greece 1 (Charisteas 68) Switzerland 2 (Frei 42-pen, Nkufo 77)
At Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0 Moldova 0

Group 3
At Teplice, Czech Republic
Czech Republic 1 (Libor Sionko 63) Slovenia 0
At Belfast
Northern Ireland 4 (D Healy 30, McCann 43, Lafferty 56, St. Davis 75) San Marino 0

Group 4
At Bratislava
Slovakia 2 (Sestak 85, 86) Poland 1 (Smolarek 70)

Group 5
At Moscow
Russia 3 (Pasanen 23-og, Lampi 65-og, Arshavin 88) Finland 0
At Moenchengladbach, Germany
Germany 1 (Trochowski 72) Wales 0

Group 6
At Zenica, Bosnia
Bosnia-Herzegovina 4 (Spahic 31, Dzoko 39, Muslimovic 56, 89) Armenia 1 (Minasyan 85)
At Tallinn
Estonia 0 Turkey 0
At Brussels
Belgium 1 (Sonck 7) Spain 2 (Iniesta 36, Villa 88)

Group 7
At Zagreb
Croatia 4 (Rakitic 16, 87, Olac 32, Modric 75) Andorra 0
At Minsk
Belarus 1 (Sitko 28) England 3 (Gerrard 11, Rooney 50, 74)

Group 8
At Kiev
Ukraine 3 (Shevchenko 16, 87, 89) Montenegro 1 (Vucinic 19)

Group 9
At Oslo
Norway 0 Holland 1 (van Bommel 63)
At Reykjavik
Iceland 1 (VP Gunnarsson 16)
Macedonia 0

Group 10
At Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Kranjcar 80) Serbia 3 (Krsinic 14, Jovanovic 18, Obradovic 24)

Group 11
At Tbilisi
Georgia 0 Bulgaria 0
At Dublin
Republic of Ireland 1 (Keane 5)
Cyprus 0
At Lecce, Italy
Italy 2 (Aquilani 8, 29) Montenegro 1 (Vucinic 19)

Group 12
At Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Kranjcar 80) Serbia 3 (Krsinic 14, Jovanovic 18, Obradovic 24)

Group 13
At Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Kranjcar 80) Serbia 3 (Krsinic 14, Jovanovic 18, Obradovic 24)

Group 14
At Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Kranjcar 80) Serbia 3 (Krsinic 14, Jovanovic 18, Obradovic 24)

Group 15
At Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Kranjcar 80) Serbia 3 (Krsinic 14, Jovanovic 18, Obradovic 24)

EUROPEAN ZONE TABLES

AFP, Paris

World Cup European zone qualifying tables after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Group 1	Denmark	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
Group 2	Greece	4	3	0	1	9	2	9
Group 3	Slovakia	4	3	0	1	8	5	9
Group 4	Germany	4	3	1	0	12	4	10
Group 5	Spain	4	4	0	0	10	1	12
Group 6	England	4	4	0	0	14	3	12
Group 7	Serbia	4	3	0	1	9	3	9
Group 8	Italy	4	3	1	0	6	2	10
Group 9	Netherlands	3	3	0	0	5	1	9
Group 10	France	3	1	1	1	5	6	4
Group 11	Austria	4	1	1	2	5	7	4
Group 12	Romania	3	1	1	1	3	5	1
Group 13	Faroe Islands	4	0	1	3	1	5	1
Group 14	Ukraine	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Group 15	Belarus	3	1	0	2	4	5	3
Group 16	Kazakhstan	4	1	0	3	5	11	3
Group 17	Andorra	4	0	0	4	1	12	0
Group 18	Armenia	4	0	0	4	1	12	0
Group 19	Albania	4	0	0	4	1	12	0
Group 20	Malta	4	0	0	4	1	12	0

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No Loew points

AFP, Monchengladbach

Germany coach Joachim Loew said it was mission accomplished as his side took a four-point lead in their World Cup qualifying group thanks to Wednesday night's 1-0 win over Wales.

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