

Abu Dhabi group now after Milan

AFP, Rome

Manchester City's Abu Dhabi owners are interested in buying a forty per cent share in Italian giants AC Milan, the Corriere della Sera reported on Tuesday.

"The Abu Dhabi United Group for Development and Investment (ADUG) wants to buy forty per cent of AC Milan's shares, injecting 500 million euros into the club's coffers," the newspaper said.

AC Milan, owned by Italian prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, issued a denial of the report on the club website, saying there was no truth to it.

Corriere della Sera said that ADUG owner Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who is also a member of the Abu Dhabi royal family, already owned five per cent of Mediaset, the Berlusconi family's TV company.

The paper said that although Berlusconi has always insisted that his involvement with AC Milan was not financially driven, it appeared that the go-ahead had been given to enter into talks with ADUG representatives.

AC Milan's 210 million euros budget is the biggest for an Italian club, but they had 32 million euros of losses last year and Berlusconi was said to be growing tired of having to finance the side.

Berlusconi's daughter Marina, the president of the family holding Fininvest, was also said to be unhappy with the financial losses incurred by AC Milan, who are currently playing second fiddle in Italian football to city rivals Inter Milan.

The ADUG group completed the purchase of Manchester City on September 1, 2008 and were behind a much publicised but unsuccessful transfer bid last month for AC Milan's star player, Brazilian midfielder Kaká.

AirAsia, Sahara in MU shirt sponsor race

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian budget airline AirAsia on Tuesday joined the race to become Manchester United's shirt sponsor as India's Sahara group said it was still in talks with the club.

AirAsia founder Tony Fernandes said on his blog that the Premier League side had invited him to discuss the deal. Struggling US insurer AIG, the current sponsor, will not renew after 2010.

AirAsia was launched as a budget carrier in December 2001 with just two aircraft. It now flies more than 100 domestic and international routes across Asia, including to London.

Fernandes, who said he was in London on Monday and about to start negotiations, described the decision on whether to commit to the shirt sponsorship as a "multi-million dollar question."

Meanwhile Sahara chairman Subrata Roy said the Indian group was continuing its talks with United.

"Discussions with the club are on. It's still at a preliminary stage and I don't want to say any more on it," Roy said in India on Tuesday.

Sahara, which also sponsors the Indian cricket team, jumped into the fray after AIG declined to renew their mega-deal worth 19 million pounds (27.5 million dollars) a year.

Talks between the club and the Indian company reportedly began in August last year, but no progress appeared to have been made until Roy's comments.

European football, especially the English Premier League, is followed passionately across Asia, including cricket-mad India, due to live broadcasts of matches.

Asian companies are increasingly visible in the Premier League with South Korea's Samsung sponsoring Chelsea and Thailand's Chang Beer emblazoned on Everton's shirts.

Manchester United have said they are confident of improving on the AIG deal, which began in 2006.



Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos (L) and forward Arjen Robben smile during a training session in Madrid on Tuesday on the eve of their Champions League clash against Liverpool.

CHELSEA V JUVENTUS

Return of Ranieri

AFP, London



It is the pronouncement emanating from Stamford Bridge this week are to be believed, Guss Hiddink walked through the door and suddenly all was harmony and common purpose once more at Chelsea.

From the carefully choreographed group hug at the end of Saturday's 1-0 win at Aston Villa - Hiddink's first match in charge - to Frank Lampard's claim that the 'old' Chelsea spirit was back, no effort has been spared in an attempt to bolster faith in the Dutchman's ability to transform the fortunes of a group of players who had lost their way, individually and collectively, under Luiz Felipe Scolari.

The win at Villa offered some grounds for optimism but the visit of Juventus on Wednesday will provide a far more testing examination of the thesis that, as Lampard would have it, the resilience that characterised Chelsea in their recent prime has been restored.

"The win at Villa was the perfect lift for Juventus but it is only a start," the England midfielder added. "We can't relax and the manager won't let us anyway."

"We need to move the ball quickly because Italian teams like to move the ball quickly and defensively they can be very frustrating. If we take too much time on the ball, we won't be able to break them down and it is important we get the right result to go out there with."

Chelsea's peak years - and the club's two Premier League titles - coincided with Jose Mourinho's time in charge.

But Blues fans also recognise the importance of the foundations put in place by Mourinho's predecessor, Claudio Ranieri, who will be back at the Bridge on Wednesday night at the helm of a Juventus side currently sitting in second place in Serie A.

Ranieri's departure from Chelsea, in 2004, was followed by an unsuccessful spell at Valencia. But he has since restored his reputation as a coach, helping to save Parma from relegation before taking on the task of reviving the fortunes of Juventus.

That work is sufficiently well advanced to suggest Juve represent a real threat to the fledgling Hiddink revival but Ranieri can nevertheless anticipate a warm reception on his return to west London.

The Italian was kept on for Chelsea's first season under the ownership of Roman

Abramovich but, despite taking the club to the semifinals of Champions League and securing second-spot behind unbeaten Arsenal in the Premier League, was pushed out to make way for Mourinho.

He can justifiably boast however of having forged the core of the Portuguese's title-winning side having made John Terry captain as well as being responsible for bringing Lampard, Petr Cech, Joe Cole and (the now departed) William Gallas to the club.

"I didn't win anything but the crowd knew very well that I built a good team," Ranieri reflected recently. "Did I get enough credit? No. I wanted to finish my job but it was impossible."

Juve will also travel with a squad that has been strengthened by a shortening of the club's injury list, Hasan Salihamidzic, the Bosnian midfielder who was a Champions League winner with Bayern Munich in 2001, is in their squad for the first time this year while David Trezeguet scored on his first start of the season at the weekend.

Ranieri has the option of pairing the Frenchman with club captain Alessandro del Piero in attack but the Brazilian Amauri is seen as more likely to start.

REAL V LIVERPOOL

Benitez plots an upset

AFP, Madrid



Rafael Benitez and his array of Spanish stars return to their homeland on Wednesday as Liverpool tussle with Spanish champions Real Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu with both vying for a first leg advantage as they bid to reach the quarterfinals of the Champions League.

It is a mouth-watering duel between two of Europe's most successful clubs and there is added spice with Benitez returning to Real where he began his coaching career working with the youth team before going on to make his mark with Valencia and then Liverpool.

Benitez is sweating on the fitness of his inspirational captain Steven Gerrard, who has not played since tearing a hamstring on February 4. The England international has been included in the travelling squad but how fit he is remains to be seen.

It will be an extra special game for Liverpool striker Fernando Torres, who is a lifelong fan of Real's city rivals Atletico Madrid where he was

captain before leaving for Liverpool in 2007.

Torres missed an emotional return to Atletico during the group phase due to injury but will be present for this Madrid homecoming and will hope to break his goalscoring duck at the Bernabeu.

"I think Fernando has been saving his goal for Wednesday night," said Benitez. "It is hard for any team to score at the Bernabeu, but for me it is just a coincidence that Torres hasn't yet scored there."

"Fernando is happy to score against any team - but it would be extra special for him to score in the Bernabeu because he grew up as an Atletico fan and player. He is now very close to being back to his best."

The game is also special for Liverpool defender Alvaro Arbeloa who came through the youth system at Real but didn't make the grade.

Liverpool beat Barcelona 2-1 at Camp Nou in the first knockout stage of the 2007 Champions League campaign and Dutch striker Dirk Kuyt said there was no reason why they couldn't do the same to Real.

"We beat Barcelona that night and nobody expected it, so we know we can beat Real Madrid too," said Kuyt.

Real's Spanish international right back Sergio Ramos insists

the hosts need to shut out Liverpool in Madrid and then go for an important away goal in the return leg on March 10.

"It will be a great game because there are a lot of my Spanish teammates in their side and I am looking forward to facing them," explained Sergio Ramos. "Liverpool are a great team and we have to concentrate on keeping a clean sheet at home and then try and score at Anfield."

For Dutch star Arjen Robben revenge is the dish of the day with the winger still haunted by the pain of the two recent Champions League semifinal defeats to Liverpool (2005 and 2007) when he was at Chelsea.

"I want to beat Liverpool because I lost twice in the semifinals," explained Robben.

The Bernabeu has proved a fortress for Real over the years and Arsenal are the only English team to defeat them on their own turf winning 1-0 in the 2005/06 first knockout round.

With a combined 14 European Cups between them - Real have nine to Liverpool's five - it is a surprise that the two teams have only met once before in European competition and it was a notable event with the Reds defeating Real 1-0 in the 1981 European Cup.

Fletcher's family burgled

AFP, Manchester

The fiancée of Manchester United star Darren Fletcher had a knife pressed to her throat during a "terrifying" burglary at his home, police said on Tuesday.

Hayley Grice was forced to take off her engagement ring while Fletcher's mother was also forced to hand over watches and jewellery at knifepoint in a raid that took place on Monday evening, just hours after the player had flown out with the United squad for a Champions League match in Milan.

Fletcher's young twins were also in the house in the upmarket village of Bournemouth, south of Manchester.

Scotland midfielder Fletcher is the latest in a long line of Premier League players who have been burgled while away with their clubs, although police said the degree of intimidation involved in the latest attack was exceptional.

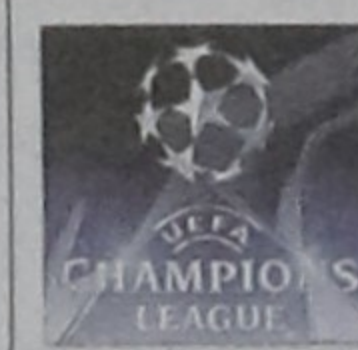
Sergeant Phil Seeley of Greater Manchester Police said: "This was a terrifying attack for the victims who were at home. Luckily the children didn't see anything and nobody was hurt."

At least seven Liverpool players, including club captain Steven Gerrard, have had their homes broken into while they have been away with the club in recent years with thieves making off with expensive jewellery and watches, soccer memorabilia and medals, and, in some cases, sports cars.

SPORTING V BAYERN

Klinsi waits on Toni

AFP, Munich



Bayern Munich are hoping to have Luca Toni back for their Champions League clash at Sporting Lisbon on Wednesday after the Italian striker recovering from a heel injury.

Bayern have lost three of their last four league games - including an embarrassing 2-1 reverse at home to strugglers Cologne on Saturday - and need Toni back for their trip to Lisbon's Jose Alvalade stadium.

Toni limped off during the first-half of Bayern's 2-1 defeat at Hertha Berlin ten days ago with an achilles tendon injury, but Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann is optimistic the striker, top-scorer in the league here last season, will start.

"I am confident he will play," said Klinsmann.

"Toni has looked good in training and we are hoping he will play."

In his absence, Lukas Podolski and Landon Donovan played a half each against Cologne, but Klinsmann said he was far from happy with the result.

"You could clearly see that his presence was missing against Cologne," said Klinsmann.

"He always takes up two markers which gives more space for our other striker Miroslav Klose."

And Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said the German giants need to buck up their ideas if they are to have any chance of reaching the quarterfinals.

"We've lost two in a row in the league, and we need to get out of this rut very quickly, starting with Wednesday's game in Lisbon," said the Bayern boss.

Although Toni could have played against Cologne,

Grandchild revitalises Maradona

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina boss Diego Maradona said on Monday he was revitalised and raring to go following the birth last week of his first grandchild Benjamin to daughter Giannina and Atletico Madrid star Sergio Aguero.

"Becoming a grandfather has revitalised me," Maradona told a Buenos Aires press conference shortly after arriving back from Madrid, where he spent several days with the couple and the new arrival, born Thursday in the Spanish capital.

"I thought that saying 'I'm a grandad' would make me old but when I saw 'Benja' a big youthful wave swept over me and gave me a beautiful new sensation, the desire to keep on living," said Maradona, 48, who has to date won friendlies in Scotland and France since taking over the national side.

"I'm going to be able to play with 'Benja', and run around" with him, said Maradona, who revealed that he was not present for the birth itself but that his former wife Claudia Villafane, Giannina's mother, was, along with Aguero.

Asked who the newborn took after he quipped: "Benja is 60 per cent Maradona and 40 per cent Aguero."

Woodgate sinks Hull

AFP, Hull



A late goal from England defender Jonathan Woodgate gave Spurs what could be a crucial three points in the fight against relegation as they beat fellow Premiership strugglers Hull 2-1 here on Monday.

Woodgate's header - in what was his 50th appearance for the London club - four minutes from time gave Spurs only their second win in their last 10 Premier League matches and first away win since beating West Ham on December 8 last year.

For Hull relegation appears to be a real possibility as they have registered just one victory in their last 17 Premier League Games and are now just six points above the drop and one above Spurs.

Spurs manager Harry Redknapp said he believed that his side had deserved the

victory but bemoaned the fact that ahead of him and the club this week lies a UEFA Cup second leg clash with Shakhtar Donetsk, who beat them 2-0 in last week's first leg, on Thursday and then their defence of the League Cup against Manchester United on Sunday.

"We've got to play on Monday and Thursday and we've got a Cup final on Sunday. It's ludicrous," said Redknapp.

"We are trying to figure a team out for Thursday. It's a tough week but it's a great start."

His Hull counterpart Phil Brown said his side had been unfortunate and insisted they had what it took to escape relegation.

"This has been a progressive season," said Brown.

"We can't lose games like that."

"We've got to learn minute details we need to pick up on."

"They know full well they didn't deserve to lose that

game. I believe we have enough ability and character in the camp."

Hull had gone close to taking the lead a quarter of an hour in but it was not of their making - as Woodgate's header back to Spurs keeper Carlo Cudicini went past the Italian but he recovered to avoid conceding an embarrassing own goal.

However, Spurs were ahead two minutes later as Hull inexcusably left Aaron Lennon unmarked at a corner and Croat Luka Modric, seeing his teammate unattended, passed to him and he made no mistake with an impressive shot.

The hosts recovered their composure after that blow - which had come against the run of play - and 10 minutes later they were deservedly level as Michael Turner turned the ball into the net after a corner kick had been missed by Cudicini and the ball had cannoned off Spurs midfielder Wilson Palacios.



Tottenham Hotspurs defender Jonathan Woodgate (L) goes airborne to score the winning goal against Hull City during their Premier League encounter at the KC Stadium in Hull on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP