

Barca consolidate

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola said the pressure was now on Real Madrid after his side beat Recreativo Huelva 2-0 at Camp Nou on Saturday to open up a nine-point gap at the Spanish League summit.

Barcelona followed up their 4-0 Champions League mauling of Bayern Munich with a hard-fought victory with Spanish international Andres Iniesta scoring the opener after just 46 seconds and an own goal from Nasief Morris clinching the three points.

"Now it's Real's turn to win," said Guardiola. "We have played our part and got the job done."

"It was hard for us but things are not always easy in football. There are eight games left and we are closer (to the title)."

Champions Real host Valladolid, who beat them 1-0 earlier in the season, on Sunday as they try to close back to within six points of Barcelona whose next game is the second leg of their European

quarterfinal against Bayern on Tuesday. But Guardiola warned his side not to get complacent saying Bayern had the firepower to hurt his team.

"Bayern are capable of scoring four goals," said Guardiola. "(Franck) Ribery, (Luca) Toni, (Bastian) Schweinsteiger and company are dangerous players."

"I didn't have to see them score four goals today (Bayern beat Eintracht Frankfurt 4-0) to know that."

Spain's other Champions League hopefuls Villarreal fell to their third league defeat in four games with a 2-0 home loss against Malaga on Saturday.

The result damages confidence for Wednesday's Champions League trip to Arsenal, with the first leg a 1-1 draw, and in the league where Valencia, two points behind, can leapfrog them into fourth with victory over Sporting Gijon on Sunday.

Worryingly for Villarreal, Spanish international Marcos Senna, club captain and the main playmaker, was taken off with a knock in the closing stages.

Incredibly Malaga, who won promotion last season, are also in the Champions League shake-up with their win moving them two points behind Villarreal.

For Barcelona keeping players fresh seems the main concern for coach Guardiola who rested Carles Puyol, Xavi and Samuel Eto'o against Recreativo to give them a breather in the season run-in.

Uruguayan Martin Caceres started in defence against his old club while Bojan Krkic replaced Eto'o in attack.

After watching Barcelona smash four goals past Bayern in the first half in mid-week, Huelva, third from bottom, would have wanted to keep things tight but it didn't work out that way.

Thierry Henry used his pace to get in behind the defence and his cut back was slotted in by Iniesta with just 46 seconds gone.

Victor Valdes was then called upon to make a great save to foil Sebastian Nayar in the sixth minute.

Barcelona were controlling proceedings and Lionel Messi thought he had doubled the lead minutes before the interval only for Morris to block his goalbound shot.

An own goal provided Barcelona with the second goal they craved as the sliding Morris diverted Iniesta's cross into his own net.

Lionel Messi missed a penalty late on but it proved irrelevant.

Bayern roar back

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich bounced back after two chastening defeats to rout Eintracht Frankfurt

4-0 on Saturday with Franck Ribery the main architect of this much needed pick-me-up.

The France international scored one of the goals and was instrumental in setting up another in a result that has given under-fire coach Jurgen Klinsmann some much needed breathing space from his critics.

Klinsmann's job looked in jeopardy after last weekend's 5-1 humbling by Wolfsburg followed three days later by the humiliating 4-0 drubbing dished out by Barcelona.

With their Champions League aspirations all but over Bayern had to win Saturday's assignment to maintain their

Bundesliga title challenge and they did the business to move into second, leaving Klinsmann to hail his men for showing character after their humiliation in Barcelona.

"That was a classy showing by the team after the debacle of Barcelona. We wanted to put things right again for our fans," said Klinsmann, who promised his side would go down fighting if they do indeed exit Europe as expected on Tuesday.

Bayern took a third-minute lead when Luca Toni set up Ribery, who scored with an angled shot from the right from 20 metres for his seventh goal of the season.

Barely quarter of an hour later the former Marseille playmaker conjured up a pinpoint freekick with his left foot for Toni to volley in.

On 35 minutes Brazilian Lucio headed in from a corner for Bayern's third with Bastian Schweinsteiger completing a satisfactory afternoon's work three minutes after the break.

Bayern remain three points behind Wolfsburg, who notched up their ninth straight

win, a 2-1 affair at Borussia Moenchengladbach.

Wolfsburg largely failed to replicate last weekend's stunning romp over Bayern over a Moenchengladbach side that are struggling to avoid the drop.

Wolfsburg's Edin Dzeko put the Bundesliga leaders in front in the 21st minute only for the home side to level with 11 minutes left on the clock.

But Wolfsburg maintained their impressive run with Sascha Riether's 85th minute matchwinner.

Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath said he had expected a rough time. "We had expected a tough game and that's what we got. At the start Borussia were the more active team and we were lucky not to fall behind. In the second half we had the upper hand."

Elsewhere surprise early pacesetters Hoffenheim crashed 3-0 at VfL Bochum after having two players sent off while Hertha Berlin were beaten 2-0 at Hanover 96.

Rafa stokes the fires again

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez has re-stoked his feud with Sir Alex Ferguson by suggesting the Manchester United manager has been made "nervous" by Liverpool's late charge for the Premier League title.

Benitez has been involved in a series of verbal spats with Ferguson this season and the Spaniard could not resist another dig after two goals by Fernando Torres inspired Liverpool to an emphatic 4-0 victory over struggling Blackburn Rovers at Anfield on Saturday.

Although United returned to the top of the table by winning at Sunderland later in the day, Liverpool signalled that they will push them to the wire with a performance that was the perfect response to last week's 3-1 home defeat to Chelsea in the Champions League.

Benitez insisted his side's result had left United and Ferguson under pressure.

"Clearly you can see that they are under pressure," said the Liverpool manager. "Ferguson is always talking so that means that they are under pressure."

Benitez appeared to be referring to Ferguson's comments prior to the weekend's fixtures, in which he had questioned why Benitez had chosen to talk about him ahead of his side's meeting with Chelsea.

"He's got a European tie (against Chelsea) and he's talking about Alex Ferguson," the Scot had said. "Fantastic! I didn't know I was that important!"

Benitez duly responded in kind. "Do I take it as a compliment that he's talking about me?" he asked. "I don't care but I know he is nervous so it's good."

Terry pleads for Hiddink

AFP, London

John Terry believes Guus Hiddink is the only man to lead Chelsea after reports linked the Premier League club with a move for AC Milan boss Carlo Ancelotti.

Hiddink has revitalised Chelsea since taking over from Luiz Felipe Scolari on a temporary basis earlier this season.

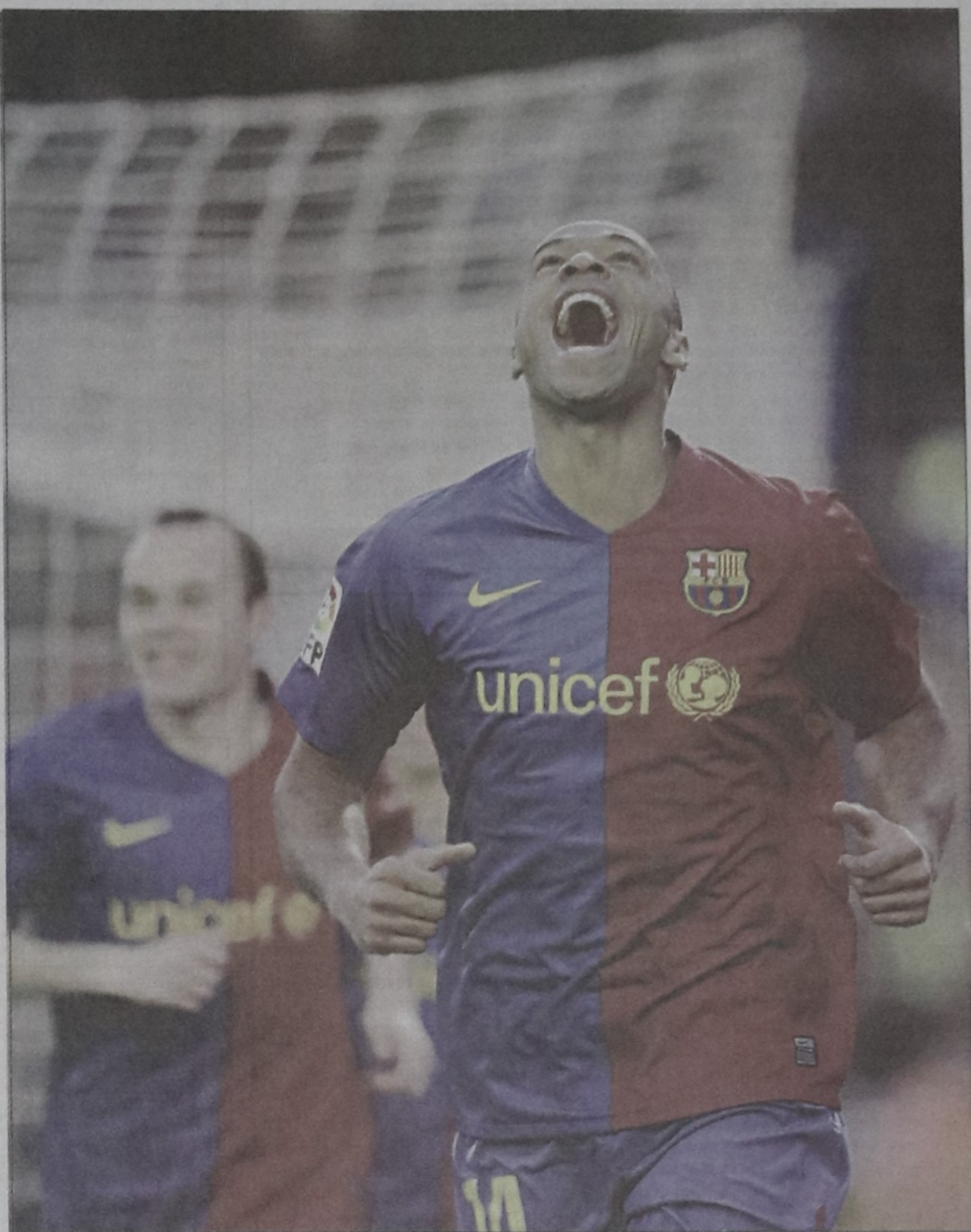
But the Dutchman's contract runs out in May and his insistence that he will resume his role as Russia coach on a full-time basis has reportedly forced the Blues to sound out Ancelotti about the job.

However, Terry has been impressed by Hiddink's methods and wants Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich to do everything in his power to keep the former PSV Eindhoven manager at Stamford Bridge.

"He (Hiddink) has a good relationship with Roman Abramovich," Terry said. "Things have gone very well and I'm sure there will be talks ongoing. If we keep progressing there's only going to be one option."

"He's done brilliantly. He's on at us every day in training, and he doesn't let anyone get away with anything."

As well as the link with Ancelotti, it has also been reported that many of Chelsea's players would like Abramovich to move for Jose Mourinho, the former Chelsea boss currently in charge at Inter Milan.



Barcelona striker Thierry Henry (R) is ecstatic after contributing to his team's goal against Primera Liga rivals Recreativo Huelva at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on Saturday.

'Macheda is special'

Football

AFP, Sunderland

Sir Alex Ferguson has hailed Federico Macheda as "something special" after the Italian teenager rescued Manchester United for the second week in a row.

The 17-year-old, who came off the bench to score the winner in a 2-1 victory over Sunderland on Saturday, is proving to be a crucial part of United's attempt to win a third straight Premier League trophy, even though he will not

play enough games to qualify for a winner's medal if the champions do retain their title.

The Italian, who claimed a late winner against Aston Villa last week, was on target with his first touch and Ferguson is convinced that the player he took from Lazio's youth ranks two years ago is destined for a long stay at the top.

"He isn't fazed by anything," said the United boss. "I've had a chat with his family this week and he'll be okay. He will keep his feet on the ground."

Macheda's 76th-minute winner came when he deflected in a shot by Michael Carrick, sparking a debate over whether it was intentional.

"Everything he touches seems to turn to gold at the moment," Sunderland manager Ricky Sbragia said.

"He was in the right place to deflect it, but I don't know whether he knew anything about it."

While Sbragia suspected it was a freak goal, Ferguson

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Ronaldo wants Brazil back

INTERNET, undated

Just a month after his comeback from a serious knee injury, Ronaldo, the three-time World Cup winner, said Saturday he'd like to return to Brazil's national team. But it wasn't a priority, the 32-year-old football superstar told the internet website GloboEsporte.

"It's a huge desire on my part, but not a priority. I am always ready to put on the Selacao tricot," he said, referring to the uniform of the national team.

He said his immediate attention was focussed on winning the upcoming match for his team.

The World Cup master goal kicker who helped his team last win the cup in 2002 conceded that he's not yet in top form, although he's made five goals in seven games for Corinthians.

Ronaldo recently admitted he was still three kilograms over his ideal weight and that he had to get better to come out ahead in the huge scramble for national team honours.

"If I deserve to be called, I will put myself fully at service," said Ronaldo - called O Fenomeno, the phenomenon, by his fans.

Ronaldo just returned to play last month after a year's absence for injury.

Fergie draws the line with C'Ron

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has warned star winger Cristiano Ronaldo that he can't have everything his own way.

The world player of the year has cut a frustrated figure at times this season and was guilty of giving the ball away in the lead-up to goals for Aston Villa and Porto in the last week.

Ronaldo was the key figure in United's march to the Premier League and Champions League double last season but Ferguson has made sure the Portuguese star knows what is expected.

He said: "No, I don't accept

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1



Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni (2nd from R) volleys home with his left foot to score in their Bundesliga match against Eintracht Frankfurt at the Allianz Arena on Saturday.

Bordeaux go top

AFP, Paris



Bordeaux dethroned champions Lyon, at least overnight, from top spot in the French league on Saturday

after a 2-0 win at Auxerre achieved with goals from Brazilians Fernando and Geraldo Wendel.

Fernando struck ten minutes before the interval and Wendel added the second in the 80th minute to send Laurent Blanc's Girondins into pole position with 59 points from 31 games, level on points with Lyon, who chasing an eighth straight title and who host Monaco on Sunday.

If Lyon avoid defeat and Marseille can see off Grenoble at the Stade Velodrome on Sunday, then Bordeaux will slide back to third, while a Paris Saint Germain win in Lille will move the Parisians to within a point of Blanc's men going into the final stretch of the season.

Lille themselves will be out for a victory which would put them just a solitary point shy of Bordeaux in what has become a six-horse race for the title owing largely to bursts of inconsistent form by Lyon, who once again have failed to transfer their domestic dominance to the European stage this season.

Blanc, a mainstay of the 1998 French World Cup side - though he heartbreakingly missed the final win over Brazil through suspension - is already successfully passing on the knowledge learned from his massive experience as a player, even if he is still cutting his teeth as a coach.

After Saturday's win he complimented his side for a highly professional showing. "You're always happy with a win - but tonight we saw a very efficient Bordeaux in all respects. We can make still better use of the ball. But when you go away and win 2-0 without suffering too much that is very satisfying and I take my hat off to the players," said the former Marseille, Inter Milan, Barcelona and Manchester United stopper.

"I'll readily take the same consistency and results," added Blanc, noting there remains a crunch game still to come against Lyon next week. Elsewhere Saturday, Toulouse moved provisionally a point clear of PSG and Lille into fourth spot to keep alive their own unlikely bid for glory as an Andre-Pierre Gignac's 19th goal of the campaign saw off Nantes, who are stuck in the drop zone which Caen exited thanks to a 2-1 success at Le Havre.

Steve Savidan and Reynald Lemaitre netted for Caen, who were cheered by Rennes defeating Saint Etienne 1-0 in

the late match with a Romain Danze header five minutes after the restart which kept Les Verts beneath them and firmly in the drop zone.

Le Mans beat Sochaux 2-0 in a battle between sides who are still looking over their shoulders while Nancy likewise overcame Valenciennes 2-0 to keep away from immediate danger.

In Saturday's other encounter, Nice beat Lorient 2-0 in a mid-table meeting.

Ancelotti rules out Chelsea

AFP, Rome

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti categorically ruled out a move to Chelsea on Saturday following his side's 1-0 win at Chievo in Serie A.

Earlier in the week The Sun newspaper in England had claimed that a deal was done between Chelsea and Ancelotti that would see the Italian coach move to London in the summer.

But the 49-year-old, who has been at Milan since 2001, said that simply isn't true.

"I'm ruling out the possibility of going to Chelsea and I don't have to give any explanations either," he said before adding tongue in cheek: "I'm ruling out Manchester United as well."



Genoa striker Rafael Palladino slots the ball past the despairing dive of Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon to score a last-gasp winner in their Serie A clash at the Luigi Ferraris stadium in Genoa on Saturday. Genoa triumphed 3-2 to all but end the Old Lady's title aspirations.

PHOTO: AFP