

Euro champs land in SA

AFP, Johannesburg

European champions Spain arrived here Wednesday to chase glory and records at the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup in South Africa.

Wet, cold winter conditions greeted the star-sprinkled Spaniards, who were taken from a jet to their bus and whisked away for security reasons without meeting the public or media.

They face likely Group A whipping boys New Zealand Sunday in the north-west mining town of Rustenburg fresh from a 6-0 mauling of Azerbaijan in the oil-rich east European nation last night.

Spain have gone 32 matches since last losing - at home to Romania in a 2006 friendly - and are three games short of matching a record set by Brazil 13 years ago.

And if the Euro 2008 winners defeat the New Zealand 'All Whites', and Iraq in Bloemfontein three days later, they will share with Brazil and France the feat of 14 consecutive victories.

Veteran coach Vicente del Bosque, who replaced Luis Aragones after the Euro 2008 final triumph over Germany in Vienna, has already claimed a place in the record books with 10 wins on the trot since taking over a national team.

Famous Brazilian Joao Saldanha held that record for 40 years and Del Bosque came close to having his hopes of overtaking it dashed two months ago in Turkey where Albert Riera snatched a stoppage-time winner in a World Cup qualifier.

Spain, World Cup holders Italy and defending Confederations Cup champions Brazil are favourites to win the two-week tournament with South Africa, Iraq, New Zealand, Egypt and the United States completing the line-up.

The 'festival of champions' was officially launched in Mexico 10 years ago and serves as a four-yearly dress rehearsal for the FIFA World Cup, which South Africa stages next June and July.

Real eyeing C'Ron

Football

AFP, Madrid

After completing a move for Kaka, Real Madrid president Florentino Perez has said he intends to talk to Manchester United in a bid to convince the club to let Cristiano Ronaldo join the Spanish giants.

"I have not yet spoken to them but I will do it in the coming days," he told Spanish public radio RNE late on Tuesday.

Spanish media have reported that Real have a pre-agreement to sign the 24-year-old Portuguese winger from Manchester United but Perez said he has never seen this agreement, which was allegedly made by his predecessor.

However sports daily AS reported Wednesday that Perez had decided to pay 89 million euros (124 million dollars) for the 2008 FIFA World Footballer of the Year under the terms of this pre-agreement.

Rival paper Marca reported Wednesday that he had already spoken to David Gill, Manchester United's chief executive, who told the new Real Madrid president that the player would cost 96 million euros (134 million dollars).

Ronaldo, who is under contract with United until 2012, was involved in a protracted transfer tug-of-war between the English and Spanish

sides last summer, with the player having publicly admitted he wanted to join Real.

Real announced Monday that they had signed Brazilian playmaker Kaka, the 2002 FIFA World Footballer of the Year, from AC Milan for a reported fee of 65 million euros.

It was the club's first signing since Perez was sworn in once again as president of Real Madrid on June 1.

Under his previous term at Real between 2000 and 2006 he signed top players like France's Zinedine Zidane and England's David Beckham which earned the club the nickname "Los Galacticos" and boosted revenues from sales of t-shirts and other club souvenirs.

Perez said he had spoken to Bayern Munich representatives who said they were not interested in selling their French playmaker Franck Ribery.

While he said he "respected" the German side's decision, he did not completely close the door to a bid for the player, saying that if Bayern changes its mind Real would be interested.

Perez is also interested in signing David Villa, who scored a hat-trick during Spain's 6-0 friendly win in Azerbaijan on Tuesday, away from financially-troubled Spanish side Valencia.

He said he was already spoken to Valencia's new president, Manuel Llorente, who told him that he was studying which players could be sold shortly.

Mascherano not for sale

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez on Wednesday insisted that the club would not sell Javier Mascherano, despite claims from the player's agent that the midfielder would favour a move to Barcelona.

"Mascherano has no price," Benitez told www.liverpoolfc.tv. "Barcelona could not afford to match his value to Liverpool Football Club. We do not want to sell and Javier is very happy here."

"I have spoken to Javier two or three times this summer - the last time was only last week - and he was very happy, very positive."

"He gave me the private number of his agent, Walter Tamer, and again the conversation was very positive and was all about football."

Tamer was quoted in the British press as saying that Argentina captain Mascherano, arguably the best defensive midfielder in world football, would be proud that Barca were interested in him and suggested a move could be "feasible".

But Benitez claimed he had made it clear that Liverpool would not sell a player he regards as a key component of his side.

"Walter told me that two clubs with big, big names were asking after Mascherano - and I told him to forget it, that Javier was happy in Liverpool and he was not for sale," the Reds manager added.

"So I was surprised to see the agent's comments today."

"He has a long contract and any club can forget about bidding for him. They can offer 40 million pounds or even 50 million, we don't want to sell."

Japan dash Qatar hopes

AFP, Yokohama

Japan dashed Qatar's hopes of reaching the play-off round as the two teams drew 1-1 on Wednesday in the Asian final qualifying round for the 2010 World Cup.

The Japanese, who have already qualified for the finals ahead with Australia, took a 1-0 lead only two minutes into the game at the Yokohama stadium.

Defender Atsuto Uchida sent a cross from the right into the Qatar area, where Ahmed Ali Al-Binali failed to clear, instead sending the ball into his own net.

In the ninth minute Japan forward Keiji Tamada was free, but his shot was saved before the rebound was sent wide.

Forward Ali Hassan Yahya Afif was lively for the visitors, while midfielder Mohammed Abdulraab Alyazidi missed their best chance in the 41st minute, hitting wide.

Shortly before the break, Brazilian-born defender Marcus Tulio Tanaka netted off a rebound for Japan, but it was ruled out for a foul.

But in the 53rd minute, the visitors made it 1-1 when Yahya Afif scored from the spot after Magid Mohamed Hassan was brought down by skipper Yuji Nakazawa in the area.

After Saint-Etienne midfielder Daisuke Matsui replaced Yuki Abe, the Japanese seemed to regain their rhythm and were encamped in the Qatar half for most of the second half, but they failed to take several chances.

Scolari takes over at Bunyodkor

AFP, Tashkent

Former World Cup winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari took over Uzbekistan league leaders and AFC Champions League quarterfinalists Bunyodkor, local media reported on Tuesday.

The 60-year-old, who led Brazil to the 2002 World Cup, and was sacked by Chelsea in February, signed an 18-month deal with the Uzbeki flagship side, which was earlier managed by his compatriot Zico.

No financial details of the deal were disclosed.

"Uzbekistan's football is now creating its successful history," local media quoted Scolari as saying.

"Bunyodkor as a part of the country's football has performed impressively in the last four years," he added. "The side is directed by very responsible people and it definitely has bright prospects."

The Uzbeki football federation also announced that they were expecting Scolari to coordinate the management of the national youth football academy, which was recently founded in Tashkent.

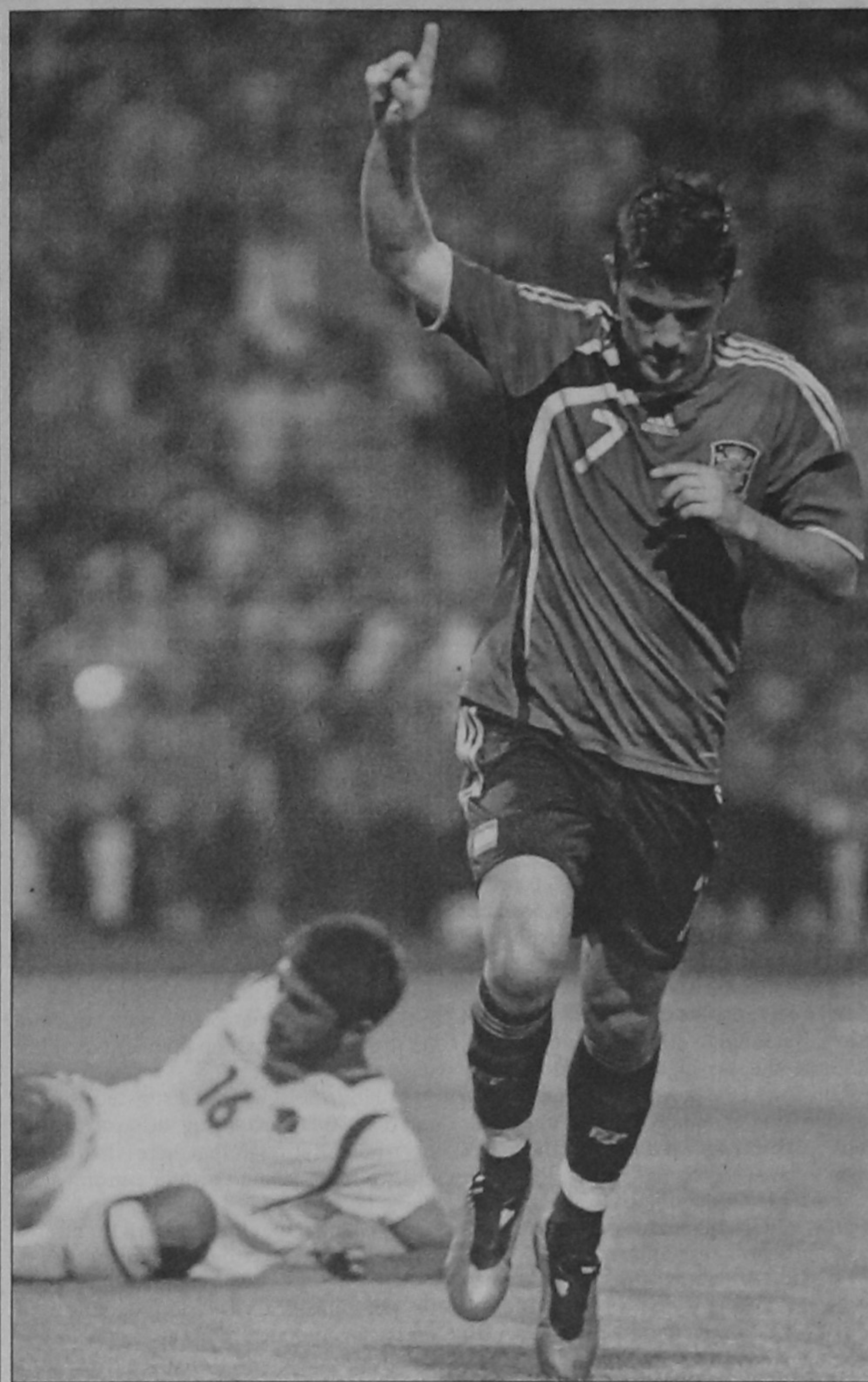


Photo: AFP

RED HOT: Spain striker David Villa (R) celebrates one of his three goals against Azerbaijan during their friendly match in Baku on Tuesday.

Sizzling Spain

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

Spain fired a six-goal warning on Tuesday as the countdown to the June 14 kick-off of the FIFA Confederations Cup in South Africa continued.

Striker David Villa, reportedly on the wanted list of super spenders Real Madrid, performed a one-man sales pitch during the first half in Azerbaijan with a hat-trick that set up a 6-0 friendly triumph.

While pitting the country ranked first in the world against opponent who weigh in at number 140 might appear cruel, the sizzling Spaniards reeled off another victory without a hint of mercy.

Euro 2008 winners Spain inhabit what appears to be much the easier of the two Confederations Cup groups with hosts South Africa and the champions of Asia and Oceania, Iraq and New Zealand.

On the other side of the draw, World Cup holders Italy come face to face with defending Confederations Cup champions Brazil, and potentially dangerous 'dark horses' Egypt

and the United States lurk in the background.

New Zealand, who have lost all six encounters in two previous Confederations Cup appearances with an embarrassing 2-17 goal tally, face Spain in the north-west mining town of Rustenburg on Sunday.

And when the score from Baku in the oil-rich east European state filters through to the 'All Whites' camp, it can only heighten fears that they are set to become the next victims of the Spanish armada.

Villa from cash-strapped Valencia demonstrated his predatory instincts by converting an Alvaro Albeloa cross, slamming home a shot from outside the penalty area, and converting a penalty when Cesc Fabregas was fouled.

Albert Riera, substitute Daniel Guiza and Liverpool goal machine Fernando Torres scored in the second half as Spain demonstrated why they are the most feared national football team in Europe.

It was much closer in Cape Town where Iraq scored first but had to settle for a 1-1 draw with Poland in their first competitive action under Serb

Bora Milutinovic, who has coached five countries at the World Cup.

Mahdi Kareem half volleyed a cross from constant menace Hawar Mohammed into the Polish net on 54 minutes only for Brazil-born Roger Guerreiro to equalise with a shot that gave goalkeeper Noor Sabri no chance.

South Africa, who edged Poland 1-0 in Johannesburg last weekend, meet Iraq in the tournament opener at Ellis Park on Sunday with the winners expected to accompany Spain into the semifinals.

Super Stadium in Atteridgeville outside Pretoria - host to numerous recent South Africa fixtures - will stage a friendly between Italy and New Zealand on Wednesday night.

This fixture presents a challenge for notoriously fickle South African football followers who must decide between attending the game in expected freezing winter conditions or watching it live on television.

The Confederations Cup began officially in 1999 and now serves as a four-yearly dress rehearsal for the World Cup, which South Africa hosts between June 11 and July 11 next year.

Socceroos edge Bahrain

AFP, Sydney



Australia laboured to beat Bahrain 2-0 in a muted celebration of their World Cup Asian qualification here on Wednesday.

The Socceroos, fielding only four survivors from the team that booked their ticket to South Africa 2010 in Qatar at the weekend, were frustrated by the fast-breaking visitors and needed second-half goals to grind them down.

Mike Sterjovski broke the deadlock in the 55th minute after he punished a defensive error inside the six-yard box and beat goalkeeper Sayed Mohamed for his eighth top-level goal.

David Carney doubled the lead in the 88th minute after Jason Culina's spectacular overhead kick ricocheted off an upright for Carney to ram the ball home for his second international goal.

Bahrain had the ball in the net during

the second half from an Abdulla Marzooq header but the defender was ruled offside.

It would have been the first time Australia had conceded a goal in their last seven qualifying games.

Australia hold on to their lead at the top of Asia Group A and will play regional rivals Japan in Melbourne next Wednesday, with both teams already through to the World Cup finals.

The Socceroos could have had a third goal but incredibly the ball stayed out after Harry Kewell and Sterjovski had goalbound chances blocked on the line in the 75th minute.

But for the most part, before just under 40,000 fans at a half-filled Olympic stadium, the Australians played like strangers, with little rhythm and wayward passing.

The surprise omissions from the Australia team were English Premier League stars Tim Cahill and Vince Grella, with Cahill left out entirely and Grella on the bench. Grella came on in the 62nd minute.

Coach Pim Verbeek said Cahill had stiff muscles and would not be risked.

Bahrain, needing a point to lock up third spot in the group and with it a potential World Cup playoff against Oceania champions New Zealand, looked the livelier in the first half.

Skipper Mohamed Salmeen had a free header off an Abdulla Abdi corner in the 24th minute but the chance went over the bar.

Celtic striker Scott McDonald had a glorious chance to break his international goal drought in his 12th game minutes later after being put clear by Brett Holman but he blazed his volley over the bar for the hosts.

Bahrain continued to press and Mahmood Abdulrahman's free-kick was flicked on, only for goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer to fumble the ball and regather at the second attempt on his line.

Sterjovski had a free header comfortably taken by goalkeeper Sayed Mohamed before Salman Isa blazed just over the bar nearing half-time.

Chelsea make Aguero bid

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea have made an offer of 50 million euros for Atletico Madrid's highly-rated Argentinian striker Sergio Aguero, according to English media reports on Wednesday.

The 21-year-old, who scored 17 goals last season to help Atletico claim a place in the Champions League, is one of the hottest properties in European football.

He said earlier this month that he wanted to stay in the Spanish capital but urged Atletico's owners to invest in player reinforcement to ensure the club was capable of making an impact among Europe's elite, suggesting he could be attracted by a switch to a club challenging for major honours every season.

The size of Chelsea's reported offer will severely test the resolve of the Atletico board to keep Aguero, who is the son-in-law of Diego Maradona.

Chelsea's desire to rejuvenate an ageing squad has also resulted in moves to sign Manchester City's 19-year-old Daniel Sturridge, who is a free agent from the end of this month.

Sturridge is set to become the best-paid teenager in English football after turning down a reported 45,000-

pounds-a-week offer from City in favour of negotiating a deal with Chelsea.

City would be entitled to compensation for developing the player and will argue that

Sturridge is in the same category as Theo Walcott, who could eventually cost Arsenal 12.5 million pounds under the terms of his transfer from Southampton.

The amount Chelsea will have to pay may have to be decided by a Football Association tribunal if the clubs cannot agree a price.

Chelsea are also said to be leading a three-horse race for the signature of their former defender Glen Johnson, who has established himself as England's first-choice right-back under Fabio Capello.

Liverpool and Tottenham are also believed to be interested in signing the 24-year-old, who will cost considerably more than the four million pounds it cost Pompey to make what was initially a loan deal from Chelsea permanent in 2007.

Liverpool's position in the transfer market is unclear because of uncertainty over the finances of their American owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, who face a July 24 deadline to refinance 350 million pounds of debt they used to acquire the club.

Hicks and Gillett have played down fears the banks will call in their loans and manager Rafael Benitez, who remains hopeful of signing Spain striker David Silva from his former club Valencia, has confirmed that he has money to spend.

"Clearly we don't have much to spend but I think we have enough money to add the one or two players that we need," Benitez said.



PHOTO: AFP

Argentina starlet Sergio Aguero holds his son Benjamin Aguerro Maradona before their 2010 World Cup qualifier against Colombia at the Monumental Stadium in Buenos Aires on Saturday. Argentina won the match 1-0.

Draw keeps Saudis third

AFP, Seoul



Cup qualifying match here Wednesday.

South Korea entered the match already assured of a berth in the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

The home side remain undefeated with four wins and three draws. The result left Saudi Arabia in third place in Group B.

The Saudis and North Korea both have 11 points, but North Korea have the edge in goal difference.

North Korea travel to Saudi Arabia on June 17 for both nations' final qualification match.

It was South Korea that played as if they needed the victory.

The best South Korean chance came in the 55th minute. Kim Dong-Jin crossed from left for Park Chu-Young. The AS Monaco forward soared over three defenders but headed the ball just over the crossbar.

After starting out as the aggressor and putting the South Korean defence on its heels over the first 20 minutes, the Saudis couldn't muster up much offence the rest of the way.

In the 60th minute, Nasser Al-Shamrani broke away from defence and forced goalkeeper Lee Woon-Jae to make a tough diving save from close range.

It was all South Korea from then on.

In the 39th, Ki Sung-Yueng pounced on a Cho Won-Hee cross and goalkeeper Waleed Abdullah punched it out.

In the next minute, Lee Keun-Ho got his right foot on the ball in the scramble in front of the goal, and Abdullah got just enough of the ball to push it out of bounds.

South Korea didn't let up in the next half.

Park Chu-Young's curling free kick in the 59th was grabbed by Abdullah. In the 71st, Lee Chung-Yong demonstrated some nifty footwork to fool Saheb Al Abdullah just outside the box but shot wide left of the goal.

Three minutes later, Kim Hyung-Il's header off a corner was barely kicked out by keeper Waleed Abdullah, who

also stopped Yang Dong-Hyen's shot on the rebound.

Saudi Arabia played the last dozen minutes a man down, after Ahmed Otaiw was sent off on his second yellow card.

Braafheid set for Bayern

AFP, The Hague

FC Twente's Dutch left-back Edson Braafheid will sign a four-year contract at German giants Bayern Munich this week, the Dutch club announced on their website on Tuesday.

The two clubs have reached an agreement on a transfer fee of 2.5 million euros and the deal will be completed when the Surinam-born 26-year-old completes a medical examination in Munich on Thursday.

Braafheid, who has also been courted by Ajax and PSV, joined Twente from FC Utrecht in 2007.

He has played 76 matches for the Enschede club, who finished second in last season's Dutch first division, and has been capped once by the Netherlands.