

Celebrities' phone hacked

Football

AFP, London

High-profile figures have contacted lawyers after their phones were allegedly hacked by a British tabloid newspaper with Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson also targeted, reports said Friday.

The allegations against the News of the World deepened after the Guardian, which broke the original story on Thursday, said Ferguson and former England captain Alan Shearer had their phones tapped by investigators for the paper.

Both men are believed to have left messages on the mobile phone of Gordon Taylor, the chief executive of Professional Footballers' Association, who the Guardian said received 700,000 pounds (820,000 euros, 1.14 million dollars) in compensation from the News of the World last year.

The Guardian said Thursday actress Gwyneth Paltrow, singer George Michael, ex-England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson and former deputy prime minister John Prescott were among other celebrities whose messages were intercepted.

A media lawyer said he and several barristers and solicitors had been contacted by various public figures seeking advice about suing the Rupert Murdoch-owned newspaper, which sells 2.9 million copies each Sunday.

Mark Stephens, of London law firm Finers Stephens Innocent, said: "At the moment it's fair to say that people are looking at their options, they want to see what is going on."

"The first hurdle for any individual is to ascertain whether they were the subject of criminal behaviour or a conspiracy for criminal behaviour."

"That requires them to obtain from the police, the information commissioner or the court details of what was happening."

He said a legal action could result in a payout

of more than half a million pounds for each individual.

The News of the World's editor at the time the phone-tapping was said to have taken place, Andy Coulson, is now the communications chief for the main opposition Conservative Party.

Conservative leader David Cameron has stood by Coulson, saying he was doing "an excellent job in a proper, upright way" for the party.

The News of the World's then royal editor, Clive Goodman, was jailed in 2007 along with a private investigator after the phone messages of aides to Prince William, second in line to the throne, were illegally accessed.

The police has refused to re-open its investigation in the light of the new allegations, but the director of public prosecutions has ordered a review of evidence.

During the trial, private investigator Glen Mulcaire admitted hacking into the phone messages of model Elle Macpherson, celebrity publicist Max Clifford -- a major source of tabloid stories -- and Taylor.

Taylor, who is effectively the head of the footballers' union, subsequently sued the News of the World and received the payoff on condition it remained confidential.

The Guardian says the paper paid a total of a further 300,000 pounds to two other figures from the world of football, but it is unclear whether they were Ferguson and Shearer.

A senior executive from the News of the World's parent company, News International, Les Hinton told a committee of lawmakers in 2007 that he was "absolutely convinced" Goodman was the only person who knew about phone hacking at the paper.

But Coulson resigned after the trial, saying he took "ultimate responsibility."

The private investigators obtained the four-digit access codes to celebrities' mobile phone message boxes, but there was no evidence that they succeeded in listening in to calls, the Guardian said.

Choosing L'pool was easy: Johnson

Football

INTERNET, undated

Glen Johnson appeared in a calm and composed mood during his first press conference as a Liverpool player following his lucrative £18 million switch from south coast club Portsmouth, revealing to the attending press that making the move to the Anfield outfit was an "easy" decision.

The defender, who vastly improved his game last season and firmly established himself as England manager Fabio Capello's first choice right-back, claimed that working under the tutelage of Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez was a key reason in signing for the Reds. Johnson noted that, despite Chelsea's reported interest, there was only one destination for him.

"When I left Chelsea I needed to play games, so I'm grateful to Portsmouth for taking me on," he enunciated clearly to the nation's journalists.

"Hopefully I've shown people a greater perspective of what I can do. I want to try and

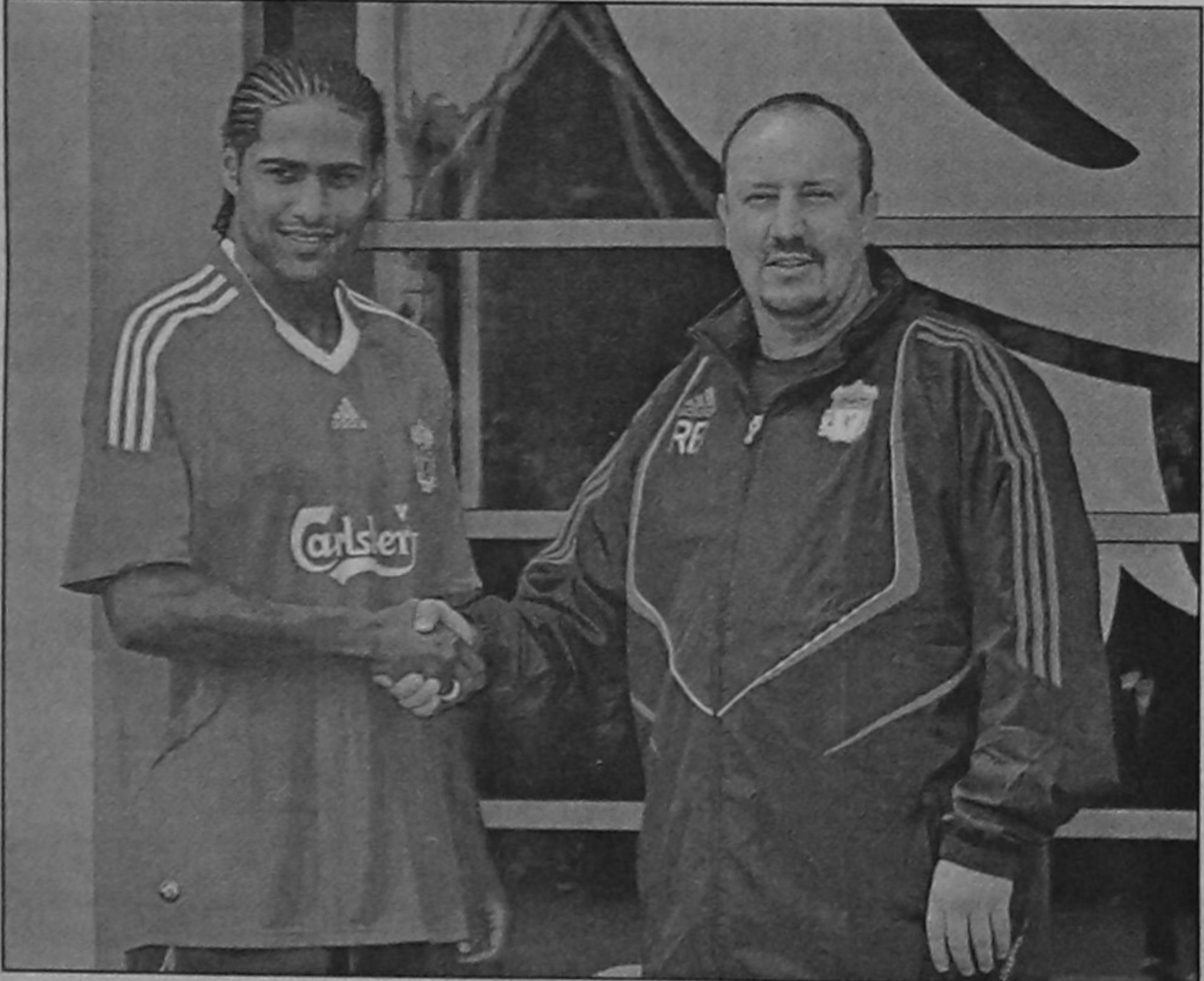
do what I did last season, with Liverpool, and also push on."

The Greenwich-born West Ham United academy product continued, "Even though I'm from south London, the first kit I had was a Liverpool one, but don't ask! I don't know how that happened!"

On the decision to sign for Liverpool ahead of a return to west London club Chelsea, Johnson said, "It was easy. Rafael Benitez was keen to help me improve and turn me into the best player that I can be."

"According to the press there was a lot of interest (from Chelsea), but when I knew of Liverpool, it was an easy decision."

Liverpool will be the fifth club that Johnson will have signed for. He received his footballing education at West Ham, before enjoying a loan spell at Isle of Dogs side Millwall. He then signed for Chelsea, becoming the first addition in the Blues' money-laden era bankrolled by Roman Abramovich. After failing to establish himself he left for Portsmouth, where he began to display the exceptional form that booked his Liverpool transfer.



Liverpool's new signing right-back Glen Johnson (L) shakes hands with club manager Rafael Benitez during a photocall at the Melwood training ground on Thursday.

Nakamura leaves homeland

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese star midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura snubbed the local media Friday as he left his homeland to join Espanyol from Celtic, determined to prove himself anew in his eighth season in Europe.

He refused to talk to some 50 members of the media before departing from Narita airport near Tokyo, saving his words for a planned news conference in Barcelona on Monday, when he will sign a two-year deal with the Spanish club.

Nakamura, who turned 31 two weeks ago, clinched the Espanyol deal last month, with an annual wage estimated at 1.2 million euros (1.7 million dollars), as his contract with Celtic expired.

He has spent the past month on holiday at home, living as a virtual recluse and without speaking to media.

But he briefly appeared in a talk show on Wednesday with some 200 children from a football clinic he runs in his hometown of Yokohama.

"It's all the same at any club or on the national team. I want to prove myself to the manager, to other players and to supporters," he told the event, according to sports media.

"I will be treated as a foreigner and I won't be used if I am just as good as Spanish players. I have to think what to do about that," said the left-footed playmaker and master of place kicks.

Japanese media has warned that the top Spanish league could be a risky choice for Nakamura. Three Japanese have failed to make impression in La Liga before him -- Shoji Jo at Real Valladolid 1999-2000, Akinori Nishizawa at Espanyol 2000-2001 and Yoshito Okubo at Mallorca 2004-2005.

At Espanyol, Nakamura is expected to battle for a position against a lineup of offensive players such as Ivan de la Pena and Luis Garcia.

Real present Benzema

AGENCIES, Madrid

France striker Karim Benzema passed a medical and signed a six-year contract with Real Madrid on Thursday, before being presented in front of about 20,000 fans at the Bernabeu.

"I am delighted to be able to play in the club where my idols Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldo played. Thank you (Real president) Florentino Perez," the 21-year-old said.

Benzema, the Primera Liga club's fourth high profile signing of the close season, has moved from Olympique Lyon for a fee that could rise to 41 million euros (\$57.07 million).

Benzema said Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldo will be his inspiration as he looks to fire the goals to help the Spanish giants dethrone Barcelona in La Liga.

"Ronaldo is the greatest player in the world. He is my inspiration and every time I go on the pitch I will try to repeat what he did," said the 21-year-old French striker in tribute to the club's former star attacker.

However, Benzema, bought from French side Lyon, refused to put a number on the goals he'll score in his first season with big-spending Real.

"I am at a club at the highest level, the competition at Real will be very tough and I will have to work to make my mark," added Benzema who will be paid an estimated 6.5 million euros a year.

Benzema, who was also a target for Manchester United, Barcelona and Inter Milan, added: "Real are a very big team. It's a dream to play here."

The Frenchman will play in a Real Madrid side which will also feature fellow newboys Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo.



Real Madrid's new player French striker Karim Benzema waves during his official presentation at the Santiago Bernabeu on Thursday.

Benitez salutes Gerrard deal

AFP, London

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez on Thursday saluted skipper Steven Gerrard's contract extension, claiming it would serve to bolster the team's renewed push for silverware.

Gerrard agreed a deal to stay at Anfield until 2013 in April, completing the formalities after returning from his summer holiday to begin pre-season training.

Dirk Kuyt, Fernando Torres, Daniel Agger and Yossi Benayoun have also penned new deals.

"We have spent this summer trying to secure the players we have," said Benitez.

"It's really good to keep Kuyt, Torres, Agger, Benayoun and Steven. They are here and now of the club and for the future it is really good."

"We are really pleased. We have a lot of good players who want to stay, to win and compete."

"The message has to be the same again this year - to be there, to be contenders and to fight. If we can win trophies it would be fantastic."

Plasil joins Bordeaux

AFP, Bordeaux

Czech midfielder Jaroslav Plasil on Thursday joined Bordeaux from Spanish club Osasuna in a four-year deal, the French League champions announced.

The 27-year-old who spent seven years at Monaco and at Creteil before moving to the north Spanish club two years ago where he scored eight times.

"It's a challenge which opens up the possibility for me to play in the Champions League and other competitions," the Czech international said.

"A factor which counted towards my coming here is that Bordeaux is a club where the focus is on playing the ball."

Plasil joins a squad which has been reinforced by the permanent signing of playmaker Yoann Gourcuff (on loan last season from AC Milan) and the arrival of goalkeeper Cedric Carrasco from Toulouse.

"He is an experienced player with a lot of talent who can play on the left and the right. He's got a powerful physical presence and exceptional technical qualities," said Bordeaux president Jean-Louis Triau.

Cycling

AFP, Barcelona

Norwegian Thor Hushovd finally ended his frustrating wait for victory on this year's Tour de France by winning a treacherous, rain-hit sixth stage from Girona to Barcelona Thursday.

Saxo Bank's Fabian Cancellara retained the race leader's yellow jersey with a 0.22sec lead on American Lance Armstrong after the 181.5km stage ahead of the first day of climbing in the Pyrenees on Friday.

Despite attempts by Armstrong's Astana team to distance their yellow jersey rivals further with accelerations of pace on the climbs, the biggest star of the day was Hushovd.

The big Cervelo rider, handing his new team their first victory on the Tour, had to eat humble pie in the opening days of the race as British sprint rival Mark Cavendish coasted to consecutive victories on stages two and three.

As the more agile sprinters climbed to their battle on the uphill finish line, Cavendish had to settle for 16th place.

It was no surprise that Hushovd pumped his arms in the air, shouting defiantly moments after he had beat Spaniard Oscar Freire to victory.

"It's been a really stressful week, with crashes and the rain and just the race itself ... I'm just so happy," said Hushovd, winning his first stage this year to take his career tally to seven.

"It's always good to win on the Tour, but after everything that's happened this has to be one of my best."

He added: "I don't mind the uphill finish. I got to the front, and I still had a bit left in the legs. I saw Oscar Freire go but I managed to get past him and win."

In a dramatic finale Scotland's David Millar saw his ambitious attack come to an agonising end just 2km from the finish line as the pace of

the sprinters' teams ruined his day at the front among a three-man breakaway.

As a 40-strong group raced past the Scot on the way towards the Olympic stadium at Montjuic, it was every man for himself as the uphill finish line approached.

Freire pulled slightly forward of the rest in the closing 150 metres but Hushovd drove more powerfully up the Spaniard's right hand side to beat him by a bike length.

Cavendish retained the sprinters' green jersey by just one point over Hushovd, the 2005 winner of the points competition's prize, who denied it would be an easy task to take over from Cavendish in the mountains.

"It would be nice to but he climbs pretty well too, Cavendish," added Hushovd.

But as the race heads upwards, it is the race for the yellow jersey that will take centre stage.

On Friday's first day in the Pyrenees, Cancellara - who is not a realistic contender for the race's main prize - is almost guaranteed to lose the lead, which could go to second place Armstrong, or to teammate Alberto Contador.

But the Swiss, who also wore the yellow jersey for a week in 2006 and has since won a number of smaller stage races, said he might be ready to give it a try.

"There's far better climbers here than were at the Tour of Switzerland," said Cancellara, who won in Switzerland after managing to stay with most of the leaders on the race's climbs, which are nevertheless easier than on the Tour.

"I want to defend it but I just don't know how far I can go. If it's over for me tomorrow it doesn't matter. It's been a great week and I've been proud to wear the jersey."

"But I'm ready to try and defend the jersey."

Armstrong hinted that for the first time this year, he was ready to let 2007 champion Contador take centre stage.

"I know Alberto wants to assert himself in the race, I don't need a team meeting to tell me that," said the American.

"I know he's ready to go (attack), if he goes - and no-one can go with him - I will just hang back and stay with the other leaders."

Sturridge dreams of UCL

AFP, London

Chelsea's new teenage striker Daniel Sturridge targeted the Champions League on Thursday, but nearly side-stepped the thorny question of John Terry possibly heading for his former club Manchester City.

The 19-year-old left City to link-up with Carlo Ancelotti's new-look Chelsea but his first day at training was overshadowed by the future of club skipper Terry.

City have already had a 30million-pound bid for the veteran defender rejected.

"My main motivation was to play in the Champions League," said Sturridge, explaining his switch to Stamford Bridge.

"I am very ambitious and want to push myself to the highest level and play with the best in the world. I believe I can achieve big things at Chelsea."

"I am very young and I will be very patient because there are world-class players here. I am not going to get too upset if I am not playing because I know it is a long season and a lot of games."

"I want to win as many trophies as I can. I am not saying Man City have not got ambitions for the Champions League or for any competition but the main thing for me was to come to Chelsea to better me as a player."

"I will become a man here. The likes of John Terry will push me on to become a better player."

But Sturridge refused to be drawn into the debate over Terry's future.

"That's a matter for John and Chelsea to deal with. I am just looking to make an impact at the club," he said.

Pennant switches to Zaragoza

AFP, Paris

Liverpool winger Jermaine Pennant completed his switch from Anfield to promoted Spanish side Real Zaragoza on Thursday on a three-year deal.

The 26-year-old, who played in the 2007 Champions League final, said he had snubbed offers from other clubs to play in Spain.

"I wanted to come to Spain. I had offers from other important clubs in Europe but I wanted to sign for Real Zaragoza," Pennant, who played 163 matches in three seasons at Liverpool, told the club's website.



Czech Republic midfielder Jaroslav Plasil poses with his new Bordeaux jersey in Le Haillan on Thursday.