

Press attacks Diego

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona's sexually-explicit, foul-mouthed rant at his growing army of media critics, which overshadowed Argentina's World Cup qualification, drew a scathing response on Thursday.

Maradona had just overseen a 1-0 win over Uruguay in Montevideo which allowed the two-time world champions to squeeze nervously into the 2010 finals in South Africa when months of simmering rage finally boiled over.

"There were those who did not believe in this team and who treated me as less than nothing," said Maradona, whose team had endured a chaotic, lacklustre qualifying campaign.

"Today we are in the World Cup finals with help from nobody but with honour. To all of you who did not believe in us, and I apologise to all the women here, you can suck it and keep sucking it," he added, repeating the phrase.

"A festival of rancour", headlined La Nacion newspaper, which wrote that "Maradona was devoured by anger...by a surplus of tension which finally exploded in the form of vindictive outbursts against journalists."

"Provocative, insolent. These obscenities will go round the world, increasing the shame. The team continues to go to the dogs."

Maradona's outburst has already become a sensation with Internet sites selling T-shirts emblazoned with the phrase "They can keep sucking it".

Argentina's faltering campaign, in which Maradona called-up 78 players and presided over four wins and four defeats, will lead to more questions over the coach's future.

The country's biggest-selling newspaper, Clarin, blasted Maradona's outburst at the news conference which also saw him grab his testicles before gesturing at the TV cameras.

"On the night that he achieved his objective, instead of relaxing and savouring the moment, he vented his aggression," said the newspaper.

Maradona will discuss his future as national coach next month with Argentine football federation (AFA) chief Julio Grondona.

But his outburst has not helped his cause.

In a survey, carried out by La Nacion's Internet edition on Thursday, 79 percent of readers said that the AFA should sack Maradona.

Later Thursday, Grondona refused to condemn Maradona's outburst.

"In the heat of the moment, people say things that they later regret," said the AFA chief, adding that he believes Maradona will continue in the job.

"I'm not thinking of a change. Diego, like us has the power to improve things."

Top teams clash

AFP, Rome



The picture at the Serie A summit could look a little clearer following this weekend's matches as four of the top five clash in direct top-of-the-table encounters.

Champions and leaders Inter Milan travel to fifth-placed Genoa who could go top with a victory if other results go their way.

In Turin third-placed Juventus host Fiorentina, below them by just one place and goal difference.

The biggest game, though, takes place in Genoa where Inter have already lost once this season having been defeated 1-0 by Sampdoria -- second behind Inter on goal difference and travelling to the capital Rome to face Lazio on Sunday.

The clash has an intriguing sub-plot as Inter poached Genoa's two best players in the close season, paying out big money to prise away Argentine striker Diego Milito and Brazilian midfielder Thiago Motta.

In return Genoa signed veteran Argentine forward Hernan Crespo from the nerazzurri and he will be desperate to put one over his former employers having found himself surplus to

requirements in Milan in the summer.

He is certain to play a part, even if he starts on the bench, whereas both Milito and Motta are out of the clash with injury.

Inter club captain Javier Zanetti knows things will be tough in the coming week as Inter host Dynamo Kiev and former AC Milan star Andrei Shevchenko on Tuesday in Europe's Premier competition.

"We're expecting two difficult matches, in the league against Genoa and then in Europe against Dynamo Kiev," he said.

"We know that playing Genoa in front of their own fans is never easy but we want to do well and maintain top spot."

In Turin Juve's Brazilian midfielder Felipe Melo will come up against the employers he left in the summer.

Fiorentina midfielder pair Marco Marchionni and

Cristiano Zanetti will be in an identical situation but all eyes will likely be on La Viola striker Alberto Gilardino, Italy's midweek hat-trick hero against Cyprus.

In fact it is the strikers who will generate most interest as Juve's Vincenzo Iaquinta is currently Italy's first choice forward while team-mate Amauri, a Brazilian, is trying to get international clearance to play for Italy.

All three will be hoping to impress to further their own international aims.

Meanwhile one midtable clash will spark plenty of interest as it probably should have been the plum tie of the weekend.

Struggling AC Milan, 12th, host eighth-placed AS Roma in what many would have thought at the beginning of the season could be an early test of each team's title aspirations.

Instead it has become a match that both must win and neither can afford to lose if they hold any hopes of keeping pace with the early front runners with Roma five points and Milan seven points behind Inter.

However a defeat for either would open up a more ominous looking gap but perhaps points is not either team's primary problem.



Indian star Sania Mirza celebrates a point against Marion Bartoli of France during their Japan Open quarterfinal in Osaka on Friday. Unseeded Mirza advanced to the semifinals after second-seeded Bartoli withdrew from the match due to injury in the second set.

Wozniacki thru' to semis

Tennis

AFP, Osaka

Defending champion Caroline Wozniacki on Friday avenged her recent loss to Aleksandra Wozniak of Canada to reach the semifinals at the Japan Open women's tennis tournament.

The 19-year-old Danish top seed, who conceded a match against the Canadian while suffering a viral illness in Tokyo two weeks ago, restored her status with a 6-2, 6-7 (1/7), 6-2 win.

Wozniacki, ranked sixth in the world after her runner-up finish at the US Open, took the last four games in a row to win the first set with ease. She found herself 0-4 down in a second-set tie-breaker, eventually losing it 1-7.

But the Dane chalked up a comfortable 4-0 lead in the final set and was never again in danger in the two-hour, 13-minute battle.

In the semifinals on Saturday, Wozniacki takes on third seed Samantha Stosur of Australia, the winner over 2002 champion Jill Craybas of the United States.

The other semifinal match will be played between fourth seed Francesca Schiavone of Italy and Indian star Sania Mirza, who both got through their quarterfinal matches comfortably.

Schiavone walked over seventh seed Melinda Czink of Hungary, who abandoned Friday's match with a right foot injury.

The 22-year-old Mirza defeated 2006 champion Marion Bartoli when the French second seed retired with a right shoulder problem at 6-4, 2-0 down.

Bartoli was vying for the final spot in the season-ending championships against Jelena Jankovic of Serbia, Vera Zvonareva of Russia, Agnieszka Radwanska of Poland, and Flavia Pennetta of Italy.

Brazil atop

AFP, Paris

Brazil stayed top of FIFA world rankings released on Friday while Argentina jumped two spots to sixth and Russia fell out of the top 10.

Portugal were the big winners, jumping seven spots into 10th, while the Russians now sit 12th behind the United States.

1. Brazil 1632 points
2. Spain 1629
3. Netherlands 1340
4. Italy 1215
5. Germany 1161 (-1)
6. Argentina 1103 (+2)
7. England 1101
8. Croatia 1087 (+1)
9. France 1049 (+1)
10. Portugal 1042 (+7)

FIFA to probe Maradona

AFP, Cairo

FIFA is to open a disciplinary investigation into Diego Maradona after the Argentinian coach's sexually-explicit, foul-mouthed rant after his team qualified for the 2010 World Cup.

"We've been left with no other option than to open a disciplinary investigation into the Argentinian team coach," said Sepp Blatter, head of FIFA, football's world ruling body. Maradona rounded on his critics after Argentina's 1-0 win over Uruguay on Wednesday, a victory which saw the two-time world champions squeeze nervously into next year's finals in South Africa.

The 48-year-old, a sporting icon in Argentina after skipping the 1986 World Cup winning team, enjoyed a honeymoon period at the start of his coaching reign before the knives began to be sharpened.

He was widely pilloried for the record 6-1 World Cup qualifier defeat in Bolivia and his relationship with the country's soccer-obsessed sports media never recovered.

Three more losses - against Ecuador, Brazil and Paraguay - threatened to dump Argentina out of the World Cup picture for the first time since 1970.

And Maradona was in belligerent mood after the Uruguay match, telling journalists to "suck it and keep sucking it".

Blatter, who was in Cairo for the final of the under-20 World Cup, warned that Maradona might have fallen foul of FIFA regulations which could result in a fine of up to 29,400 dollars and/or suspension.

"According to article 58.a, anyone who harms the dignity of a person through acts or words can be punished," said Blatter.

"The case will go to the disciplinary committee and I cannot say anything else. It's a matter of jurisdiction for this committee."

Article 58.a states: "Anyone who offends the dignity of a person or group of persons through contemptuous, discriminatory or denigratory words or actions concerning race, colour, language, religion or origin shall be suspended for at least five matches."

"Furthermore, a stadium ban and a fine of at least 20,000 Swiss francs shall be imposed. If the perpetrator is an official, the fine shall be at least 30,000 Swiss francs."

Blatter also bid a fond welcome to Argentina to the World Cup.

"Naturally, Argentina received the card from the president congratulating them as he did to all the teams including the smallest ones," he said.

Barca's Valencia test

AFP, Madrid



comes under threat on Saturday when the champions travel to Valencia in arguably their most difficult fixture so far.

Real Madrid have an easier task with a home game against Valladolid but must again do without Cristiano Ronaldo whose ankle injury flared up on international duty with Portugal.

Valencia are likely to be without star striker David Villa - who Barcelona tried to capture for a reported 40 million euros in the summer - due to a thigh injury but still have the firepower to hurt Barcelona in Spanish internationals Juan

Mata and David Silva.

Barcelona equalled their best ever league start with six wins and hope to set a new club record by notching a seventh successive win at the Mestalla Stadium.

Madrid, who welcome Valladolid, fell to their first defeat of the season - a 2-1 loss at Sevilla - last time out and the sometimes dramatic local media decided to attribute the defeat to the absence of Ronaldo claiming Real suffered from 'Ronaldo dependency'.

Ronaldo has scored nine goals in seven games for Real but will again be missing after aggravating his ankle injury in a brief appearance for Portugal.

"I am not some kind of saviour but after the Sevilla defeat I wanted to help my teammates win the upcoming matches," explained Ronaldo. "I am sad because I was on a

good run and getting injured again is a blow."

Sevilla outclassed Real to suggest they could disrupt the Madrid-Barca title monopoly, but need to build on that win at Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday.

Deportivo have had a great start to the season lying fourth

FIXTURES

Saturday
Deportivo La Coruna v Sevilla 1600 GMT, Real Madrid v Valladolid (1800 GMT), Valencia v Barcelona (2000 GMT)
Sunday
(all 1500 GMT unless stated)
Xerez v Villarreal, Espanyol v Tenerife, Real Zaragoza v Racing Santander, Malaga v Almeria, Real Mallorca v Getafe, Athletic Bilbao v Sporting Gijon (1700 GMT), Osasuna v Atletico Madrid (1900 GMT)

in the standings after three straight wins while Sevilla are on a run of five consecutive victories.

It is a great time for Sevilla new boy Alvaro Negredo who helped defeat old club Real last time out, made his Spain debut against Armenia on Saturday and scored his first international goals against Bosnia-Herzegovina on Wednesday.

Elsewhere only two teams have yet to win a league match with six games gone and they meet on Sunday when promoted Xerez host Villarreal.

Xerez were expected to struggle but Villarreal's stuttering start has come as a surprise with coach Ernesto Valverde longing for his maiden win.

Three points from six games sees Villarreal languish second from bottom a point above basement boys Xerez.

Bayer take on Hamburg

AFP, Berlin



There promises to be a battle royal in the Bundesliga on Saturday evening as the league's top two sides Hamburg and Bayer Leverkusen square off in the Hanseatic City.

League leaders Leverkusen only hold top spot by virtue of a superior goal difference and both sides at the HSH Nordbank Arena will be defending an unbeaten record after eight games.

Hamburg have lost several stars with knee injuries as defenders Alex Silva, Collin Benjamin and Miroslav Stapanek plus striker Paolo Guerrero have all suffered torn cruciate knee ligaments and are out for a number of weeks.

Defender Bastian

Reinhardt, foot, and forward Mladen Petric, ankle, are also ruled out for the rest of the first half of the current campaign.

But Hamburg are still in good form and ex-Bayern Munich midfielder Ze Roberto has had a new lease of life since quitting the Isar for the Alster and has been a big part of their success this season.

With David Jarolim playing as a holding midfielder, the

Brazilian is able to spear-head attacks and has earned a good return with four goals and three assists so far.

Bayern Munich look set to welcome back Dutch stars Mark van Bommel and Arjen Robben for Saturday's trip to Freiburg, while Italy's Luca Toni could also feature for the first time this season.

But van Gaal must do without the services of Frank Ribery who is still labouring with a knee injury.

Third-placed Schalke have won their last two games while Stuttgart have struggled for form having won just one of their last five league outings.

Werder Bremen have clawed their way up to fourth in the table with only one defeat to their name all season and they host Hoffenheim who had won their previous four league games before they were humbled 2-1 by Mainz last time out.

FIXTURES

Saturday
VfB Stuttgart v Schalke 04, Werder Bremen v Hoffenheim, Cologne v Mainz 05, Eintracht Frankfurt v Hannover 96, Freiburg v Bayern Munich, Nuremberg v Hertha Berlin, Hamburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Sunday
VfL Wolfsburg v Borussia M'gladbach, Borussia Dortmund v VfL Bochum

WC hangover weighs heavy

AFP, London



A week of World Cup qualifying drama will weigh heavily on the Premier League this weekend as Chelsea head to Aston Villa aiming to maintain their lead over Manchester United at the top of the table.

Injuries picked up on international duty threaten to sideline the likes of United striker Wayne Rooney and Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard while all of the league's 20 managers will be grappling with the emotional hangover suffered by players who experienced World Cup joy and heartbreak.

Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti can count on Didier Drogba firing on all cylinders after a week's rest in the wake of the Ivory Coast's draw with Malawi which clinched their place in next year's finals in South Africa.

In contrast, goalkeeper Petr Cech, who returns from suspension, will have spent the last few days digesting the disappointment of the Czech Republic's failure to even reach the play-offs for a final slot.

For Villa boss Martin O'Neill, the week has left him with an unwanted headache following Emile Heskey's public declaration that his lack of first-team football at the club might lead him to seek a January move in order to bolster his hopes of starting for England at the World Cup.

Villa also have Ashley Young, James Milner, Stewart Downing and Gabriel Agbonlahor hoping to go to South Africa with England and O'Neill is determined to prevent them being distracted by thoughts of glory on the international stage.

Rooney may be doubtful for United's meeting with

Bolton after missing England's final World Cup qualifier with a calf injury.

But United boss Sir Alex Ferguson will have been cheered by the form of Dimitar Berbatov, who struck a 38-minute hat-trick for Bulgaria in midweek, and has Michael Owen fit again as a potential partner.

Harry Redknapp takes third-placed Tottenham travel to bottom side Portsmouth for what promises to be a highly-charged encounter against his former club.

Redknapp, who won the FA Cup in his second spell in charge at Fratton Park, left the club for Spurs last year.

Sunderland, who were denied a famous win over Manchester United by an injury-time equaliser in their last outing, will seek to end a seven-year wait for a home win over Liverpool.

The combination of Kenwyne Jones and seven-goal top scorer Darren Bent will provide a significant test of a Liverpool defence that has appeared uncharacteristically shaky this season.

Arsenal entertain Birmingham in what will be the visitors' first outing since Hong Kong businessman Carson Yeung completed his takeover of the club.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated)
Arsenal v Birmingham, Aston Villa v Chelsea (1145 GMT), Everton v Wolves, Manchester Utd v Bolton, Portsmouth v Tottenham, Stoke City v West Ham, Sunderland v Liverpool
Sunday
Blackburn v Burnley (1200 GMT), Wigan v Manchester City (1500 GMT)
Monday
Fulham v Hull (1900 GMT)

IN BRIEF

Pele applauds Argentina

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian legend Pele congratulated bitter rivals Argentina on their World Cup qualification on Thursday, insisting that the finals need to have Diego Maradona's team involved.

"I wasn't against Argentina. They are my friends," said triple World Cup winner Pele.

"I said before the match (Argentina beat Uruguay 1-0 on Wednesday to secure their place in the 2010 finals) that a World Cup without Argentina would not be the same."

"It's good for Maradona that Argentina qualified," Pele told TV Globo. "For those who love football, Argentina could not be out of the World Cup."

Hughes plays down Robinho's Barca talk

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City manager Mark Hughes insists Robinho still has a future at Eastlands despite the Brazil forward's reported admission that he would love to join Barcelona.

Robinho is currently sidelined with an ankle injury but he fuelled speculation of a January move to the Nou Camp when he was quoted this week saying that it would be a dream to play for Barca.

It is not the first time Robinho has been linked with a move since joining City from Real Madrid in 2008.

But Hughes said on Friday: "There is always speculation and noise surrounding Robinho. That has been the case since he came to the club."

"He is a great guy. We are not in the process of taking outstanding players out of the team."



Former England captain Bryan Robson wears a Thai national football team jacket while giving a traditional greeting during a press conference at a hotel in Bangkok on Friday. Robson has signed a four-year contract and becomes the third Briton after Peter Reid and Peter Withe to coach the Thai national team.