

Mesmerising Messi

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi scored a sensational hat-trick as champions Barcelona nudged Real Madrid off the summit crushing Tenerife 5-0 on their own patch on Sunday for their first victory of 2010.

Barca scored three times in a destructive nine minutes with Ballon D'Or winner Messi scoring two of them (36, 45) before clinching his hat-trick with a nonchalant curler late in the second half to join Valencia's David Villa on 12 goals at the top of the goalscoring charts.

Real Madrid had leapfrogged Barca with a 2-0 home win over Real Mallorca earlier on Sunday but Pep Guardiola's side responded to move back to the summit two points ahead of Real.

Barcelona's next challenge is at Sevilla in the second leg of the last 16 Kings Cup tie in which they trail 2-1 from the first leg.

Madrid had moved top of the Spanish league for the first time since the end of November with goals from Esteban Granero and Gonzalo Higuain overcoming Mallorca as they maintained their flawless home record with a ninth consecutive win.

"When Real Madrid are on song we are difficult to stop," said Granero, nicknamed 'The Pirate'. "I am happy to get on the scoresheet and that we beat a difficult rival in testing conditions."

"We just have to carry on like we are doing and Barcelona will have to slip up at some stage."

However, Real's stay at the top was brief as Barca recovered from a shaky start to put Tenerife to the sword with Messi so inspirational that even the home Tenerife fans were applauding him at the end.

Carles Puyol was also on target with an Ezequiel Luna own goal completing the scoring after great footwork from Pedro Rodriguez.

It was tough on Tenerife who lost 6-0 the last time they hosted Barcelona in the top-flight back in 2001.

Tenerife's Alejandro Alfaro could have had a hat-trick in the opening quarter hour hitting

the crossbar and forcing Victor Valdes into action.

Barca had been quiet but Bojan Krkic ghosted past his man in the 36th minute and cut back for Messi to score.

Tenerife were aggrieved and it got worse for them as Barca scored twice in two minutes.

A minute before the break Messi curled in a devilish free-kick and Puyol used the pace of the ball to glance in a header.

On the chime of half-time Andres Iniesta's sublime pass released the effective Bojan who set up a tap-in for Messi and a 3-0 lead they didn't deserve.

Thierry Henry smacked the post early in the second half before Messi showed why he is the best player on the planet curling in brilliantly from 20 yards as if he were still in a training session.

Freezing temperatures and snow in the Spanish capital saw some Real fans at home but for the players gloves and undergarments were the order of the day.

Kaka returned for Real in his first appearance since injuring his groin at the end of November and almost scored on his return.

Mallorca had won 3-1 at Real last season but got off to a nightmare start conceding after just seven minutes.

Higuain cut inside and curled a beautiful shot into the top corner with his left foot that gave the goalkeeper no chance.

Substitute Granero volleyed in expertly minutes after the break to clinch the points.

Valencia lie six points behind Real in third after making it seven wins from nine on the road defeating bottom side Xerez 3-1 on Sunday.

"Barcelona and Real Madrid have a high number of points and in past seasons we would be top or close to them with the points tally we have," said Valencia coach Unai Emery.

Spanish internationals Juan Mata, David Silva and Carlos Marchena were all on target to clinch victory at Xerez and boost confidence for Thursday's last 16 King's Cup match at Deportivo La Coruna.

Deportivo are four points behind Valencia in fourth after a 1-0 home victory over Osasuna on Sunday thanks to a Juan Rodriguez goal.



Barcelona star Lionel Messi celebrates one of his three goals against Tenerife during their Primera Liga encounter at the Heliodoro Rodriguez Lopez Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Police arrest two

AFP, Luanda

Police in Angola grilled two suspects Monday over a deadly shooting attack by separatist rebels on the Togo team which overshadowed the start of Africa's premier football tournament.

The pair were arrested in Cabinda, an Angolan enclave inside the Democratic Republic of Congo, close to the scene of Friday's attack which ended with the death of the squad's assistant coach and media spokesman.

"Two people have been captured, when we have more information, we will pass it on to the public," Antonio Nito, Cabinda's provincial attorney general, told the state-run National Radio.

The Togolese team withdrew from the African Cup of Nations following the attack and left Angola on Sunday evening to return home following orders from their government, despite appeals by the players to be allowed to stay.

"It's very sad. It's hard for Africa and for us," Togo captain Emmanuel Adebayor told AFP at the airport in Cabinda.

"These things are part of life, you have to accept it," the Manchester City striker added.

The tournament was meant to showcase Angola's recovery after a 27-year civil war which ended in 2002.

But the attack has instead shone an unwelcome spotlight on the government's inability to end a low-level insurgency in oil-rich Cabinda.

A splinter group of the independence movement FLEC (Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Angola) has claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it warned Confederation of African Football (CAF) boss Issa Hayatou against holding matches in Cabinda.

"This is going to continue, because the nation is at war, because Hayatou persists," said Rodrigues Mingas, secretary general of the Forces for the Liberation of the State of Cabinda-Military Position (FLEC-PM).

Speaking at the tournament's opening match in Luanda on Sunday night, which ended in a dramatic 4-4 draw between the hosts and Mali, Angola's veteran President Jose Eduardo dos Santos denounced Friday's attack.

"We condemn this act of terror, but the competition will continue in Cabinda," Dos Santos said as he opened the tournament. "We are together, may the best man win."

His government and African football officials pleaded to the last second for

Togolese authorities to allow the players to fulfil their wish to compete in the tournament to honour their slain colleagues.

Togo's withdrawal has plunged the organisation of the tournament into chaos. They had been due to play Ghana in Cabinda on Monday evening but that match has now been cancelled.

However the match between Burkina Faso and tournament favourites Ivory Coast, the first of the tournament in Cabinda, is due to kick off at 1600 GMT.

The attack prompted calls for the tournament to be scrapped and Ghana's government has demanded extra security for its players.

It has also raised questions about players' security at this year's World Cup in South Africa, the first time the tournament has been staged in Africa.

Phil Brown, manager of English premier league team Hull, is among those who have called for his players to return from Angola immediately and said the attack threw a "question mark" over the World Cup finals in South Africa.

But World Cup organising chief Danny Jordaan said the attack in Angola had nothing to do with South Africa and that a particular incident should not damage the reputation of the continent as a whole.

France vows response

AFP, Paris

France on Sunday vowed a response to comments from an Angolan separatist whose group has claimed the deadly attack against Togo's football squad, after the France-based rebel threatened more violence.

"Such comments are unacceptable and will not go without a response," said Bernard Valero, spokesman for the French foreign ministry. "We condemn them in the strongest terms. Nothing can justify the call to violence, nor inciting violence through the press."

Valero added that "France had immediately condemned the attack on the bus that transported the Togo national team and demanded that those responsible be pursued, arrested and held responsible for their crimes before the courts."

Rodrigues Mingas, secretary general of the Forces for the Liberation of the State of Cabinda-Military Position

(FLEC-PM), who now lives in exile in France, had earlier threatened further violence in an interview with AFP.

Friday's gun attack that killed at least two members of the Togo squad cast a pall over the opening of Africa's premier football tournament, the Africa Cup of Nations.

"This is going to continue, because the nation is at war, because Hayatou persists," said Mingas, referring to Confederation of African Football boss Issa Hayatou.

"Weapons will continue to talk. This is our home, and it's time Angola understood that."

He told AFP by telephone: "We wrote two months before the Nations Cup to Mr Issa Hayatou to warn him that we were at war. He did not want to take our warnings into consideration."

"They were warned, they knew it, and they closed their eyes."

Mingas's faction is one of several groups battling for independence in small but oil-rich Cabinda, a cornerstone of Angola's economic boom, despite a 2006 peace agreement.

IN BRIEF

Adebayor very sad to leave

AFP, Cabinda

Togo captain Emmanuel Adebayor said he was "very sad" for his team to leave the African Cup of Nations on Sunday, two days after a rebel ambush in Angola killed two members of the squad.

"It's very sad. It's hard for Africa and for us. These things are part of life, you have to accept it," the Manchester City striker Adebayor said through the window of a bus as the team arrived at the airport in the northern enclave of Cabinda.

Other players declined to answer questions as they arrived at the airport under heavy security.

At least two people were killed and nine injured when the team's convoy was ambushed Friday as they crossed the border into Cabinda from neighbouring Congo-Brazzaville.

Van der Vaart out for several weeks

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Dutch midfielder Rafael Van der Vaart will be out of action for two to three weeks following an injury at the weekend, the club said Monday.

The player was stretched off the field during Real's 2-0 win over Majorca after suffering a tear in his left calf muscle.

"He will probably be unavailable for 2-3 weeks," Real said.

Van der Vaart was bought from SV Hamburg for 13 million euros in 2008.

He had been out of favour with new coach Manuel Pellegrini until Kaka became injured in late November, since when he has proved an effective stand-in for the Brazilian star.

Kaka made his first appearance for Real on Sunday since injuring his groin.

Togo keeper in stable condition

AFP, Johannesburg

Togo goalkeeper Kodjovi Obilale was in a stable condition but still in intensive care in a South African hospital on Monday after a deadly gun attack on his squad in Angola, the hospital said.

"Currently he is stable but he is ventilated and sedated to assist with recovery," Milpark Hospital spokeswoman Erin Smylie told AFP.

Obilale underwent emergency surgery on Saturday at the private Johannesburg hospital after being airlifted from Cabinda where he was shot in the back after gunmen ambushed the Togo squad's convoy on Friday.

"The medical team is satisfied with the progress of Mr Obilale. He will however remain in the trauma intensive care unit until he is fully out of danger," said doctor Ken Boffard in a statement.

Mali's miraculous recovery

AFP, Luanda

Mali made a miraculous recovery to pull back from a four goal deficit to hold Angola to a 4-4 draw in the opening game of the 2010 Africa Cup of Nations here on Sunday.

The hosts appeared set for the best possible start when a first half double from Flavio Armado and penalties from Gilberto and Manucho had them celebrating a famous victory.

With only 16 minutes on the clock Mali looked down and out.

But a double from Seydou Keita and contributions from Frederic Kanoute and Mustapha Yattabare gave them an improbable draw.

Angola coach Manuel Jose said: "This draw tasted like a defeat to me, this is one of the most bitter pills I've ever had to swallow in all the matches of my long career."

"Football in Africa is learning on the road, we have the skills but we were a little naive."

"It makes the next match a little more complicated. The public deserved a win."

Angola skipper Kalli added: "We have to raise our heads - I'm so sad and sorry there's no explanation for letting go of such a big lead."

"But we've got to give a good response in our next match."

Mali coach Stephen Keshi, who lifted

the title with Nigeria as a player in the 1990s, didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"It was a little difficult to believe we might come back. I've got mixed feelings, I'm happy with a draw but upset with my team."

This Nations Cup curtain raiser began with a minute's silence in memory of the victims of Friday's deadly gun attack on the Togo team coach in Cabinda.

The silence, immaculately observed by the 50,000 capacity crowd, turned to something much louder seconds after kick off when Mali goalkeeper Mahamadou Sidibe had to look lively to deal with Flavio's shot from the left.

The Angolan striker only made the starting XI after shrugging off injury but Keita was on the bench after missing the Eagles' warm-up games with a thigh problem.

Angola were forced into an unscheduled change of personnel in the 22nd minute when Aderito Carvalho was stretched off and replaced by Djalmá Campos.

Mali coach Stephen Keshi sent Barcelona midfielder Keita into the fray sooner than expected when Le Mans forward Modibo Maiga limped out of contention.

This was the first ever match at the 11 November stadium built by the Chinese and resembling a smaller version of Beijing's Bird's Nest.

And the 'Chicks Nest' burst into life in the 35th minute when Flavio raced on to

Gilberto's angled 20 metre freekick from the left to put the hosts in front with a low powerful header.

One minute from the break Flavio got his double, another fine header set up by fullback Jose 'Malbina' Alberto.

That prompted the wife of Angolan head of state Jose Eduardo dos Santos to jump off her seat and execute a very un-First Lady style jig.

Mali's multi-million pound strikeforce led by Sevilla's Kanoute had proved strangely impotent in the first half.

They looked a more powerful force after the interval, with only Angola keeper Carlos Fernandes' charge out of his box stopping Mali captain Mahamadou Diarra's shot.

Gilberto then struck from the spot after he was brought down in the box by Mamadou Samassa.

The Al-Ahly midfielder proved a cool customer as he converted, but was then ordered to have a second go by Egyptian referee Essam Abdel Fatah, which he duly struck past Sidibe.

Manucho got Angola's fourth, also from the spot after another foul on Gilberto.

But then Angola crumbled. Keita began the comeback after a scramble for the ball in the box following a mistake by Fernandes.

Then Kanoute struck with a classy header, with Keita producing a volley for his double and Yattabare grabbing a highly unlikely point for the Eagles.

Milan humiliate Juve

AFP, Rome

Defensive horror shows at three corners saw AC Milan humiliate Juventus 3-0 at Turin's Stadio Olimpico and all but end their rivals' Serie A title hopes and leave coach Ciro Ferrara's job on the line.

The victory meant Milan moved to within eight points of leaders Inter Milan with a game in hand and the Milan derby to come in two weeks time.

A victory for the rossoneri in that would ensure the champions come under much greater pressure than they have in their previous four title triumphs.

Juve are 12 points back and have lost six of their last eight matches in all competitions while they are also out of the Champions League.

Fans protested after the second goal and some clashed with police afterwards outside the ground but Ferrara remained defiant.

"It's clear that the 3-0 was a fair result, this is a very difficult time for us," he admitted.

"But I honestly don't think my job is at risk, I'm totally concentrated on it."

"It's not up to me to make decisions, my energies need to be concentrated on the team and trying to overcome this moment."

"I understand (the fans') disappointment, it's understandable because we're not getting results, it has to be up to us to change these things."

Alessandro Nesta and a Ronaldo brace settled the affair but all three goals were due to Juve's inept defending at corners.

Milan coach Leonardo denied the Old Lady of Turin had made life easy for his team, though.

"Honestly it was very difficult, especially in the first half

when we needed some time to get organised," he said.

"We struggled but we didn't give up many chances, we didn't create a lot but we conceded even less."

"The second half was perfect, we managed to hold the ball, pass it quickly and we gave Juve problems."

It was an unsurprisingly tentative start from both teams but Juve playmaker Diego tried to spark the game into life on 13 minutes as he cut in from the left and curled a right-foot shot just wide of the far post.

However, 'The Old Lady' fell behind on 29 minutes after a defensive disaster.

Andrea Pirlo's corner was poor and sent in low to the near post but Christian Poulsen left

it, Felipe Melo missed it, goalkeeper Alex Manning was caught unawares leaving Nesta, whose marker Zdenek Grygera had stopped, the simple task of tapping home from two yards out at the back post.

Juve did belatedly react but it was centre-back Giorgio Chiellini, their best player, whose shot was straight at goalkeeper Dida after his central defensive partner Fabio Cannavaro's weak effort fell to him.

Milan, though, finished the half on a high as Manning parried Thiago Silva's long range strike before Ronaldo's header from David Beckham's corner was deflected behind.



Milan forward Ronaldo points to the heavens after scoring against Juventus during their Serie A clash at the Olympic Stadium in Turin on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Dynamo sign Voronin

AFP, Moscow

Russian top flight side Dynamo Moscow have signed Ukrainian striker Andriy Voronin on a three-year contract from Liverpool, the Russian club announced Sunday.

The 30-year-old forward, who spent last season on loan at Hertha Berlin, has signed his personal contract with the Russian side after meeting his new coach Andrey Kobozev.

Dynamo sporting director Konstantin Sarsania told the club's official website: "The transfer of Andriy Voronin can be considered accomplished."

"The clubs have reached an agreement and the player signed a contract for three years."

No financial details of the deal were disclosed. Voronin moved to Anfield in 2007 from Bayer Leverkusen after 12 years in Germany but scored only five goals in 27 league appearances for Liverpool.

"I had options for continuing a career in Germany, and several in Russia, but eventually opted for Dynamo," Voronin said.

"I liked the professional approach of the leaders of the Moscow club during negotiations and I also liked the conversation with head coach Andrey Kobozev."

French goalkeeper Sebastien Frey made two crucial second half stops to help Fiorentina beat Bari 2-1 in Florence and go sixth.