

Colombian FA in dire straits

AFP, Bogota

The Colombian football federation is in such dire financial straits that the government is set to pass a bill that would open the country's professional clubs up to private investment.

Officials recently revealed to having debts equivalent to 45.9 million euros. Federation president Luis Bodoia has warned that the federation runs "the serious risk of going bankrupt".

Currently, around half of the 36 clubs in the top two divisions are experiencing financial woe. Some clubs have been unable to pay players' wages, leading to strike threats and half-empty stadiums.

Carlos Gonzales, a member of the Professional Players Association, told AFP: "It's terrible. Even in the first third of the season a lot of clubs were unable to meet their commitments. And the second (third) of the season looks as though it will be even worse."

As a result, the government has been forced to intervene.

German Vargas, Colombia's new Interior and Justice minister, submitted proposals for a rescue plan to parliament earlier this week. The hope is for private investors to step in and take over the clubs, pay the players and establish a more sound regulatory system.

However some sceptics are already warning of difficulties ahead.

Sports journalist Gabriel Meluck claims the financial survival of many clubs is linked to the lucrative drug dealing market.



Stoke City striker Kenwyne Jones (L) heads in the equalising goal past West Ham goalkeeper Robert Green (R) during their Premier League encounter at the Britannia Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

MU's most-anticipated tie

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson claims that Liverpool is still Manchester United's most-anticipated match despite the Anfield club's recent slump.

Ferguson is preparing his side to meet Roy Hodgson's team on Sunday, with the two clubs level on 18 English league titles each.

The Scot admitted that when he arrived at Old Trafford in 1986 that his aim was to knock Liverpool "off their perch".

While United were pipped by Chelsea to the Premier League title last season, Liverpool finished a disappointing seventh.

But even though Ferguson claims Chelsea are United's main title rivals and neighbours City have once again spent heavily in the transfer market, he insists that games against Liverpool remain the biggest days in his year.

He said: "I say time and again when this fixture comes about. It is the fixture, no doubt about that."

"Historically it's always been that way. I don't need to always look at the history."

"Even industrially, it was always been a competition between Liverpool and Manchester since the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal so it's always going to be there."

Ferguson's interaction with Roy

Hodgson's predecessor Rafa Benitez was notoriously frosty.

The United manager maintains he never made the relationship "personal" but is full of praise for Benitez's replacement.

He added: "I've never been personal. You have to examine him (Benitez), not me, I've never been personal."

"I've always enjoyed a good relationship with the Liverpool managers and both clubs have always addressed the situation properly after games. That changed under the last regime, but it's not a big issue for me."

"Roy has got experience and did a great job at Fulham. I've known Roy a long time. We first met in 1987 I think on one of these aborted trips to Malmo when they aborted the game after one minute."

"It was a European tie against Ajax and he was at the game and we went to dinner after it."

"I've known him a long time and he's gathered a wealth of experience in Italy, in Switzerland, Finland and Scandinavia and the job he did at Fulham was extraordinary."

Ferguson claims that United did not follow up the opportunity to sign Joe Cole, who joined Liverpool on a free transfer from Chelsea during the summer.

"We were approached by his agent at one point but we didn't enter into it (discussions) at all. It was maybe just compli-

cated to get involved in that," he said.

The United manager is set to make a host of changes for the Liverpool game and must decide whether to replace Rio Ferdinand with Jonny Evans, while Edwin van der Sar and Dimitar Berbatov are set to return.

Hodgson is also set to bring back the likes of Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard after resting players for the 4-1 Europa League win over Steaua Bucharest, while Cole returns from a domestic suspension.

The Liverpool manager feels the fixture is comparable to the meetings between his former club Inter Milan and Juventus, not that he likes to be reminded of his record in that fixture.

He said: "It compares with Inter v Juventus. The Milan derby was a big occasion but the 'Derby d'Italia', Inter v Juventus, was the real killer one and it certainly compares with that. In terms of the interest it generates in the two cities and the whole country."

"When Inter played Juventus it was something which occupied the thoughts and minds and generated the opinions of the whole country."

"It's a little bit like that with Liverpool and Manchester United. It transcends the north western rivalry and is perhaps even global because both clubs are so big outside of England."

"I didn't like losing, which I did quite often. We did poorly and I would like to change that, it'd be nice."

Helmes eyes Euro berth

AFP, Berlin

Striker Patrick Helmes is hoping to win a place in Germany coach Joachim Loew's starting line-up for next month's Euro 2012 qualifiers after putting his injury nightmares behind him with a hat-trick.

Leverkusen's Helmes scored a hat-trick against Trondheim Rosenberg in his side's 4-0 win on Thursday in the Europa League.

After a cruciate knee ligament injury cost him a World Cup place, he is hoping to feature in next month's Euro 2012 qualifiers.

The 26-year-old tore his cruciate ligament in a freak accident while playing football with friends just after the 2009 German Cup final, when his team lost to Werder Bremen.

Helmes struggled to regain his fitness after his return last November and missed the trip to South Africa, but is hoping to face Turkey and Kazakhstan for Germany in next month's Euro 2012 qualifiers.

"Now it seems that my tough year is behind me and the sun can shine on me again," Helmes told German daily Bild after his hat-trick.

"The national team is a topic for me, but in the meantime, I want to score a few more goals for Leverkusen in the next few weeks."

Helmes has scored two goals for Germany and won 13 caps, but he netted in the 2-2 draw with Denmark last month in a friendly on his first appearance for the national side in more than a year.

Hughes keen to keep Schwarzer

AFP, London

Fulham manager Mark Hughes is convinced a new deal will help persuade Australia goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer to stay at Craven Cottage.

Schwarzer was linked with a four-million pound move to Arsenal in the summer and Hughes knows that once the transfer window reopens in January, the 38-year-old World Cup keeper will once again be a target.

"If we could tie Mark down to a longer contract that would be the ideal for me," said Hughes.

"It might not be an option open to us as he is well within his rights to look at his options in January."

"I want him to stay and would be more comfortable and think that I have a chance of winning if Mark was playing."

"We hope that he will stay until the end of the season. His immediate future is here. We're pleased with that and will look to January when we have to."

"We are hopeful that we can show him what we want to do and where we want to go. I have made it known to him that I want him to be part of that."

Hammers' 1st point

AFP, Stoke



Bottom club West Ham secured their first point of the season after eking out a hard-fought 1-1 draw at Stoke in the early English Premier League game on Saturday.

Midfielder Scott Parker had fired the Hammers into a first-half lead before Stoke striker Kenwyne Jones levelled for the home side early in the second half.

The result failed to lift West Ham from the foot of the table. The London club, whose Jewish manager Avram Grant had skipped the match to observe Yom Kippur, remain rooted to the bottom with one point from five matches.

Stoke, meanwhile, climbed out of the bottom three, leapfrogging Wigan and West Bromwich Albion on goal difference.

West Ham took the lead mid-way through a scrappy first half at the Britannia Stadium in which both sides struggled to carve out many clear chances.

Stoke had come closest to scoring when a jittery Robert Green fumbled a Jermaine Pennant free-kick, allowing Robert Huth to jab a close-range effort against the post with the Hammers goalkeeper beaten.

But after surviving that scare, West Ham were to take the lead on 32 minutes when a free-kick from Victor Obinna caused havoc in the Stoke defence.

A frantic clearance from Rory Delap

cannoned back off Ryan Shawcross and into the path of Parker, who hooked into the net from close range to claim his second goal of the season.

Moments later West Ham could have doubled their lead after a surging run from Frederic Piquionne ended with the former Portsmouth striker thumping a curling 20-yard shot against the woodwork.

The opening 45 minutes were also increasingly fractious, both sides picking up two yellow cards apiece from referee Lee Mason.

Shawcross was lucky not to see red after a off-the-ball incident where he appeared to swing an arm into the face of West Ham forward Carlton Cole.

Having preserved their lead until half-time, West Ham saw their advantage vanish within a few minutes of the restart.

A perfectly weighted Jon Walters pass released Pennant down the right-hand side and the winger picked out Jones with an exquisitely flighted cross that the Trinidadian striker nodded home from close range.

Jones almost put his side ahead on 59 minutes only to be denied by a superb point-blank save by Green, who diverted the striker's shot onto the upright.

Thomas Sorensen saved from Obinna and Manuel da Costa as the Hammers pushed for a winner, while Stoke came close to snatching victory in the 82nd minute when Ricardo Fuller sent a header against the underside of the crossbar.

'Chelsea most balanced'

AFP, London



Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti is convinced his side is the most balanced in the Premier League, which is the reason why it keeps on producing so many one-sided results.

The Premier League champions entertain Blackpool on Sunday having won all five of their games so far.

And with 21 goals having been racked up in those, the expectation is for Chelsea to win by a significant margin once again.

Ian Holloway's side will be aiming to prove otherwise of course, especially as they have already upset the odds by winning at Wigan and Newcastle on their top-flight return.

But Blackpool were also beaten 6-0 at Arsenal last month - a scoreline Chelsea have inflicted on both West Bromwich Albion and Wigan - and Ancelotti intends to put out a full strength side following Wednesday's 4-1 win at Zilina in the Champions League.

"You have to propose a kind of football with the players you have and we have fantastic ability up front," he said. "We have to put a kind of football on the pitch to showcase this quality."

"Balance is important in football. If you have players with skill and ability, you can show this balance. You have to find that balance: to be able to attack and defend."

Midfielder Frank Lampard is still recovering from groin surgery so will not feature and defender Jose Bosingwa is also sidelined but Ancelotti will bring back a host of familiar faces

who did not feature in Slovakia.

Striker Didier Drogba, who was suspended, is one and Ashley Cole, Ramires, Paulo Ferreira and Salomon Kalou are all expected to return to the starting line-up.

Ancelotti was keen to ward off any complacency however.

"Blackpool are a good team and have won two away games and are showing good skills in the Premier League," he said. "We have to pay attention. We are doing well now and we want that to continue."

Blackpool will be pinning their hopes on striker DJ Campbell getting the better of former England captain John Terry.

"I'm going to be up against a world-class defender but I've nothing to lose," the former Leicester City man said.

"My mentality is that I want to play against these guys and prove I can score against them. It just fires me up really."

"Terry is a great player, like all the Chelsea players, but we want to be on the same pitch as them. To score again and get a result would be nice - to say the least."

Campbell will be looking to midfield playmaker Charlie Adam to supply the ammunition and the Scot was keen to pit his skills against the league leaders.

"They are the champions and they have some of the best players in the world but we aren't going to make it easy for them or lie down," he declared.

"We will try to win the game, like we did at Newcastle and Wigan. If we're good enough on the day, then great; if we're not, we will reflect and move on."

Maradona meets ex-president

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Football legend Diego Maradona met with ex-Argentine president Nestor Kirchner on Friday, his first public appearance after bitter words exchanged over his dismissal as the country's national team coach.

Maradona, 49, has been largely out of the media spotlight since his return from South Africa, where he took his team to the 2010 World Cup quarterfinals but lost to Germany in a humiliating 4-0 defeat.

The Argentine living deity met Kirchner, Argentina's president 2003-2007, at the meeting at the Los Olivos presidential palace where Kirchner's wife Cristina is president.

"They talked about football and history, there was a little bit of everything, remembering anecdotes -- it was a meeting of friends," said Kirchner's spokesman Juan Manuel Abal Medina. The ex-national team coach gave the former president a signed national team jacket.

Maradona was last seen in public on July 28 after he lost his coaching job and accused Julio Grondona, the head of the Argentine Football Association (AFA), of lying to him, and accused team manager Carlos Bilardo of betraying him.

He claimed that the pair had gone back on their word after telling him his job was safe after Argentina's crushing defeat in South Africa.

Maradona, one of the greatest football players in history, was fired as head coach after just 18 months for refusing to replace some of his backroom staff.

However he received support from the highest level, with President Cristina Kirchner expressing her sadness at his sacking and saying the star did not deserve his treatment.

Mertesacker set to return

AFP, Bremen

Germany defender Per Mertesacker is set to return to Bundesliga action next Tuesday, just a fortnight after fracturing his eye socket, and could play in next month's Euro 2012 qualifiers.

The Werder Bremen centre-back told German daily Bild he will play, wearing a protective mask, in his club's German league derby against Hanover on Tuesday, having suffered the facial injury in the win over Azerbaijan on September 7.

The 25-year-old feared for his sight after being elbowed in the face in the game in Cologne, but is now expected to play against Turkey and Kazakhstan in next month's Euro 2012 matches for Germany.

Germany play Turkey at Berlin's Olympic Stadium on October 8 and Kazakhstan in Astana four days later.

The 25-year-old has 71 caps and is a first-choice centre-back for both club and country.

Mourinho unlikely for Portugal

Football

SOCCERNET

Real Madrid boss Jose Mourinho has admitted it is unlikely he will take temporary charge of Portugal - but stopped short of ruling himself out entirely.

The Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) have earmarked Mourinho as the man they want to lead the national team qualifiers against Denmark on October 8 and Iceland four days later while they go about appointing a full-time successor to Carlos Queiroz, who was sacked last week.

Mourinho has admitted it is unlikely he will take temporary charge. In a press conference on Friday, reported on www.marca.com, he said: "If it were not for Real Madrid I would do it for free. But if you ask me right now if I can go, I think not. I have a contract with Real Madrid. I do not say no, but in the natural way of things, I do not think this is the time."

"Real Madrid have every right in the world to put an obstacle in the way. And if you put the slightest obstacle there, I can't go. To say no to Portugal is impossible because of my personal pride and my passion for Portugal, but at the moment I cannot say yes."

Goalkeeper Iker Casillas believes former Inter Milan, Chelsea and Porto boss Mourinho has enough on his plate at the Bernabeu.

He said: "I think it would give him too much. I am sure he would like to coach Portugal but his head only thinks of Madrid. I don't think he will go. I have talked to him and his mind is set on Madrid."

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Reports in Portugal claimed FPF president Gilberto Madail had travelled to Madrid to meet with Mourinho's agent, Jorge Mendes, in an attempt to broker a deal.

Former FPF president Joao Rodrigues has accompanied Madail on the trip, according to the reports, as he has good connections in Spain that could help secure Mourinho's short-term release.

Mourinho continued: "The FPF has not contacted Real and what the club knows is through me. Portugal wants me for those two games."

"They know I will not have any players to train, with the exception of three, during the international break, while if I went, I would be coaching three Real players in Cristiano Ronaldo, Pepe and Carvalho."

"They thought that Real would not lose out with my absence and that is why they want me for the national team."

"If I was a free agent, I would go tomorrow but I'm at Real and I cannot say yes because my duty is with them, but neither can I say openly no because that would be impossible."

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Argentine legend Diego Maradona (L) meets with former president Nestor Kirchner at the presidential residence in Buenos Aires on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP