



Manchester United striker Javier Hernandez (R) tussles for the ball with West Bromwich midfielder James Morrison during their Premier League encounter at Old Trafford yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Rioting fans paid 200,000 euros

AFP, Belgrade

Two fugitive chiefs of criminal gangs paid more than 200,000 euros to football fans whose rioting forced the cancellation of Serbia's Euro 2012 qualifying match against Italy earlier this week, a daily newspaper reported Saturday.

"More than 200,000 euros had been paid to more than 60 hooligans for organisation, trip, getting equipment and rioting due to which the match in Genoa was not played," the pro-government Politika daily said, quoting a source close to the probe.

According to the report, police are following a lead that the riots were ordered by two chiefs of separate criminal gangs -- a cocaine dealer suspected also of money laundering and one believed to head a criminal organisation linked to a number of murders, robberies and violence.

It was likely that the two, "despite being in a financial dispute with each other, financed the riots because both have interests to create chaos in the state" of Serbia, the source, who asked not to be named, told Politika.

Police have also been checking a lead that people dissatisfied with the situation in the Serbian Football Federation had been behind the riots, but the source said this was a less likely scenario.

The match in Genoa was stopped on Tuesday after just six minutes due to Serbian fans throwing flares onto the pitch and at rival Italy supporters.

Police in Italy made 17 arrests and 16 people were hospitalised after the clashes in Genoa. The injured included two policemen.

Serbian police have detained 35 football fans on their way back from Genoa in northern Italy.

The Interior Minister Ivica Dacic promised a thorough police probe into the incidents.

Serbia has stepped up the fight against organised crime in a bid to meet conditions for membership in the European Union.

Storck leaving Kazakhstan

AFP, Berlin

Kazakhstan's German coach Bernd Storck announced on Saturday he will not be staying on in the post when his contract comes to an end at the end of this year.

The 47-year-old - in the post since October 2008 - told German agency SID that the Kazakh federation did not wish to extend his contract after he failed to achieve the goal of having at least three points following their first four Euro 2012 qualifiers.

Kazakhstan have failed to score a goal or garner one point and were beaten 3-0 by World Cup semifinalists Germany in last Tuesday's Euro 2012 qualifier.

Europe get 2018 WC

Football

REUTERS, New York

The World Cup will definitely return to Europe in 2018 while the 2022 tournament will now be held in the United States or Asia after the battle lines for the bidding process were finally drawn up on Friday.

Europe was always expected to win the right to stage the 2018 tournament after a 12-year gap but that only became official when the U.S. announced on Friday they were pulling out of the 2018 race to concentrate on 2022.

The decision, which had been expected for months, left just four European candidates, Belgium/Netherlands, England, Russia and Spain/Portugal, in the running to host the 2018 finals.

Under FIFA rules, the World Cup cannot be held on the same continent for successive tournaments, so the 2022 finals must now be staged by either the U.S. or one of the four Asian bidders -- Australia, Japan, South Korea and Qatar.

Soccer's world governing body FIFA, which will meet in Switzerland on Dec. 2 to select the 2018 and 2022 hosts, welcomed the American move.

"We have had an open and constructive dialogue with the USA Bid for some time now, after it became apparent that there was a growing movement to stage the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Europe," FIFA Secretary General Jerome Valcke said.

"The announcement of today by the USA Bid to focus solely on the 2022 FIFA World Cup is therefore a welcome gesture which is much appreciated by FIFA."

I was swindled: Hicks

Football

AFP, London

The former co-owner of Liverpool Football Club, Tom Hicks, said on Friday that he was "devastated" about the sale of the club and said it had been "swindled" away from him.

Although he admitted the club had "a little bit too much debt", Hicks -- who with co-owner George Gillett had tried to block the sale -- told Sky News television it was "very healthy" financially and could have been sold for more.

"I'm devastated. I'm frustrated... I'm very disappointed," Hicks said after New England Sports Ventures (NESV), owners of baseball's Boston Red Sox, completed their 300-million-pound (480-million-dollar) takeover on Friday.

"It's hurt my family tremendously. This is a very valuable asset that was swindled away from me in an epic swindle. I'm very angry about it."

Hicks denied he and Gillett had saddled the club with unsustainable amounts of debt, insisting: "Liverpool's a very healthy, financially performing club, it covers its interests fine."

"It had a little bit too much debt, no question, but we were going to fix that. We were frustrated by others."

He said that funds were available to pay off

Zinedine to collaborate with Jose

AFP, Paris

Zinedine Zidane claimed on Saturday that he is going to start working more closely with Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho.

The former France great, who retired from football in 2006, is currently employed as an advisor to Real president Florentino Perez.

"I can confirm to you that I'll be collaborating with him (Mourinho)," Zidane told Europe 1 radio during a football event at Marseille's Stade Velodrome.

Australia and Japan withdrew from the 2018 race earlier this year after it became clear Europe, which last hosted the World Cup in 2006 in Germany, was almost certain to win the vote.

"We are confident this is in the best interests of the USA bid," U.S. Soccer President Sunil Gulati said.

"We wanted to make the announcement now, still 48 days before the final decision, in order to make our intentions clear during the last part of our campaign."

Shortly after the U.S. announced their withdrawal, England formally pulled out of the running for 2022.

There were no immediate announcements from the other European bidders but they will all be expected to complete the formalities before the FIFA Executive Committee meets in Zurich in two weeks to finalise the voting process.

"England 2018/22 today confirmed to FIFA that it was withdrawing its candidature from the FIFA World Cup 2022 and will now focus on its bid to host the tournament in 2018," the England bid team said on Friday.

"This followed consultation with UEFA President Michel Platini on the most appropriate moment to withdraw."

"England 2018 is delighted it is now clear the FIFA World Cup will be coming to Europe in 2018 following the withdrawal of the United States bid."

This year's World Cup was held in South Africa and the 2014 edition was awarded to Brazil under the continental rotation system that FIFA has since scrapped.

This year marks the first time FIFA has decided the venues for two World Cups at the same time.

Moratti eyes Messi

SOCCERNET

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti claims he is no longer joking about the prospect of signing Lionel Messi from Barcelona.

The ambitious transfer proposal has been in the headlines ever since Moratti jested with an Italian newspaper that his club's next signing would be the FIFA World Player of the Year. However, the Inter chief now seems to be giving it some serious thought. "So many people are asking me to buy a world class, quality player. Messi is the strongest of them all," Moratti told La Gazzetta dello Sport. "When I spoke about it the other day I was only joking, but now we will see."

"I am starting to really ask myself that question: to buy him or not?"

Messi is the jewel in the crown at Barcelona and the club are highly unlikely to let him leave. The Argentina international has a lucrative contract that runs until 2016, with a buyout clause of 250 million euros.

Inter coach Rafael Benitez would obviously be delighted if his boss was able to secure the services of Barca's 23-year-old forward.

"If the president wants to do something about Messi, then I will not oppose him," Benitez told the press. "Messi is a great player and I will not say no."

Inter have also been linked with a swoop for Real Madrid's Brazilian playmaker Kaka, but Benitez claims he already has better players than the former AC Milan star.

"As for Kaka, we already have Wesley Sneijder and Coutinho in that position," Benitez said. "But, if they want Messi then I will say yes, it's fine for me. I will talk with them to discuss the market together."

Capello plans retirement

AFP, Rome

England coach Fabio Capello has announced that the England post will be his last in football as he plans to retire from the dugout following Euro 2012.

The 64-year-old - who was considered fortunate to remain in the post after England's disappointing exit in the World Cup quarterfinals - said at a book signing by a friend in Milan on Friday that he was too old to consider another coaching job.

"At the moment I think of nothing else but Euro-2012 with England," said Capello, who is regarded as one of the greatest club coaches.

"After that I will go into retirement."

"Unfortunately I am old, I no longer have the time: this will be my last experience on the bench."

Capello, who guided AC Milan to four league titles and the 1994 Champions League final where they overwhelmed Barcelona 4-0, has been coach of England since 2008.

While he easily qualified them for the World Cup finals, he received heavy criticism for how they performed in South Africa - eventually losing 4-1 to Germany - and was perhaps saved from the sack because he had extended his contract prior to the finals.

Baggies stun MU

AFP, London



Barclays Premier League

Manchester United squandered a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 with West Bromwich Albion as Sir Alex Ferguson's decision to leave Wayne Rooney on the bench backfired Saturday.

United looked to be cruising to victory after goals from Mexican international Javier Hernandez and Nani fired the Red Devils into a 2-0 lead after 25 minutes at Old Trafford.

But West Bromwich Albion pulled a goal back on 50 minutes when Patrice Evra deflected a Chris Brunt free-kick into his own goal, before an Edwin van der Sar howler five minutes later gifted Somen Tchoyi an equaliser.

It was the third time this season United failed to take all three points after leading -- but the major talking point of the day came with Ferguson's decision to bench Rooney.

The move came amid heightened speculation of tension between Ferguson and Rooney, who last week openly contradicted the United boss's claims he was injured by defiantly stating he was fully fit.

The draw means Chelsea can open up a seven-point lead over Manchester United later Saturday if they defeat Aston Villa in the late game.

Elsewhere, Arsenal recovered from an early goal to reignite their league campaign with a 2-1 victory over Birmingham at the Emirates.

Nikola Zigic had fired Birmingham into a

33rd minute lead before Samir Nasri levelled from the penalty spot four minutes before half-time.

Marouane Chamakh then steered home a close range effort two minutes after the restart to put the Gunners ahead. Arsenal prodigy Jack Wilshere was sent off shortly before full-time. The win moved Arsenal up to second with 14 points, ahead of Manchester United, Manchester City and Spurs on goal difference.

Tottenham also came from behind to defeat Fulham 2-1 at Craven Cottage in controversial circumstances, with referee Mike Dean over-ruling his linesman to allow Tom Huddlestone's 63rd minute winner.

A sublime piece of skill from in-form Rafael Van der Vaart earlier set up Roman Pavlyuchenko's equaliser after Diomansy Kamara's 30th minute opener.

Newcastle meanwhile needed an injury-time goal from Fabricio Colocchini to snatch a 2-2 draw with Wigan at St James Park after two goals from Charles N'Zogbia had given the Latics a 2-0 lead.

Shola Ameobi's 72nd-minute effort had launched the fightback.

In the battle of the basement clubs, Wolves and West Ham fought out a 1-1 draw. Mark Noble grabbed a share of the points for the Hammers, thundering in a 53rd-minute penalty after a blunder by Robert Green had gifted Matthew Jarvis a 10th-minute opener for Wolves.

At the Reebok Stadium, Stoke midfielder Rory Delap scored from close range to force a 1-1 draw with Bolton after Lee Chung-Yong put Wanderers ahead on 22 minutes.

Sahin fires Dortmund

AFP, Berlin



Bundesliga

Nuri Sahin's stoppage-time goal gave Borussia Dortmund a 2-1 win at Cologne on Friday that extended their winning streak to seven games and pushed them into first place in the Bundesliga.

Jakub Blaszczykowski scored the opening goal of the contest for Juergen Klopp's Dortmund in the 20th minute before Lukas Podolski equalised in the 82nd minute, only for Sahin to claim a dramatic last-gasp winner.

"We needed to make it 2-0 much earlier. And then we didn't defend properly on the equaliser. But it is amazing how aggressive the guys push forward looking for goals," said Klopp. "It's kind of scary from the sidelines."

Dortmund jumped to 21 points after eight games and lead Mainz on goal difference, having played a game more.

Mainz, who have started the season with seven straight wins, can return to the top of the table with at least a point on Saturday at home against Hamburg.

Cologne remained in 16th with five points and have picked up just a single point in their last four matches.

In rainy conditions, Dortmund's high-

octane attack nearly struck after just six minutes but Lucas Barrios sent his header just over the crossbar.

Cologne narrowly missed taking the lead four minutes later when Podolski's right foot shot from well outside the area blasted off the far upper right corner of the framework.

Barrios came close again in the 16th minute, but the Paraguay international's header off a free-kick found only the crossbar.

Dortmund finally found the back of the net four minutes later, with a bit of luck. Shinji Kawaga's cross from the left found Barrios, who headed against the right post but the rebound bounced off Blaszczykowski and over the line.

Cologne goalkeeper Miro Vavrovec, making his Bundesliga debut, made a superb stop to deny Kevin Grosskreutz from point-blank range.

And the hosts refused to go down without a fight, with Adam Matuschych heading over the crossbar after 57 minutes.

Podolski blasted home a loose ball at the edge of the area for the equaliser but Sahin came up with the winner, collecting a pass from Mario Goetze from the right side and having his shot deflect off a Cologne defender and past Vavrovec.

Saturday's bill also includes reigning champions Bayern Munich hosting Hanover, as they seek to close a 13-point deficit to the leaders, while under-performing bottom two Schalke and Stuttgart square off.



Borussia Dortmund midfielder Nuri Sahin (L) vies with Cologne midfielder Fabrice Ehret during their Bundesliga clash in Cologne on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Eto'o to lead line

AFP, Rome



Lega Calcio

Inter Milan coach Rafael Benitez said on Saturday that he will play Cameroon forward Samuel Eto'o through the middle in Sunday's trip to Cagliari.

Eto'o is the joint top scorer in Serie A this season and has bagged 11 goals in 10 games in all competitions.

Having spent most of his time at Inter on the left of a three-pronged attack, he has flourished while Diego Milito has been injured, netting a hat-trick from a central role in the 4-0 Champions League demolition of Werder Bremen.

And with Milito again out injured, Eto'o is due another run-out in the middle.

"He'll be happy. It's difficult to lose a player like Milito but Samuel is in great form and can do well," said Benitez, who played down the club's injury problems.

"Three players came back from international duty injured but it's a situation that many clubs in Europe face," he said.

ing up in mid-week but we can still work. And with all our players available we can improve."

Benitez denied that there was any relation between his training methods and the number of injuries at the club.

"Two years ago, when (former coach Jose) Mourinho arrived here following the European Championship, he had 50 injuries, 37 of those muscle problems," said the Spaniard.

"It's normal after a match that some players have some problems following preparation conditioned for big events."

Although Milito, Esteban Cambiasso, McDonald Mariga and Walter Samuel are all definitely out, Benitez is hopeful that captain Javier Zanetti and one of Goran Pandev and Thiago Motta will be fit.

"I don't yet know if both (Pandev and Motta) will be 100 percent fit but I think there's a good chance of having at least one of them," he said.

"Zanetti will undergo some tests following (Saturday's) training session."

Looking ahead to Sunday's match, Benitez knows that Cagliari are never an easy team to play in Sardinia, but he's not expecting the 12:30 (1030GMT) start time to cause any problems.

"It will be a tough match, the Sardinians are playing well at the moment and they have confidence in their own abilities," he said.

"But we're ready and prepared to do well, to win this game and then think about the next ones."

"You have to work in a slightly different way but this won't have an effect on the match."