

## Zapatero roots for Barca

AFP, Madrid

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero predicted Friday that Barcelona will crush Real Madrid 4-2 when the two sides meet next week in their first Clasico of the season.

The prime minister, a long-time Barcelona fan, told Catalan radio RAC 1 that he would not be able to watch Monday's match as he will be attending an EU-Africa summit in Libya but would ask someone to send him a text message with the result of the game.

He also heaped praise on Barcelona's short-passing playing style.

"Barcelona caresses and cultivates the intelligence of football and converts it into something more than a physical contact sport. Sometimes it recalls a game of chess," Zapatero said.

Zapatero, a socialist, said while he "respected" Real Madrid's tough-talking Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho, in terms of personality he prefers Barcelona's Catalan coach Josep Guardiola, who came up through Barcelona's youth ranks.

He also said he prefers Barcelona striker Lionel Messi's "dribbles" over the playing style of Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo.

Real go into the fixture one point ahead of Barcelona, but Barcelona's double victory in the fixture last year was crucial in determining the outcome of La Liga, which Barcelona retained by just three points.

The much anticipated match will be held one day after Catalonia votes in a regional election which polls suggest will oust the Socialist-led coalition in power there since 2003.

## Ramsey loaned to Forest

AFP, London

Arsenal's Welsh international midfielder Aaron Ramsey has joined Championship side Nottingham Forest on loan until the beginning of January, the Premier League club announced on Thursday.

The 19-year-old is bidding to return to fitness after breaking his leg in a challenge by Stoke's Ryan Shawcross in February.

He played for 45 minutes in Arsenal's reserves match against Wolves on Tuesday.

Ramsey joined Arsenal from Forest's second division rivals Cardiff City in 2008, having become the youngest ever player to represent the Welsh club at the age of 16 years and 124 days.

### SPORTS POLL

Which opening pair you think will be ideal in the Zimbabwe series?

Tamim-Nafees 55.0%

Tamim-Kayes 43.2%

TOTAL VOTES: 723

### WEEKLY QUESTION

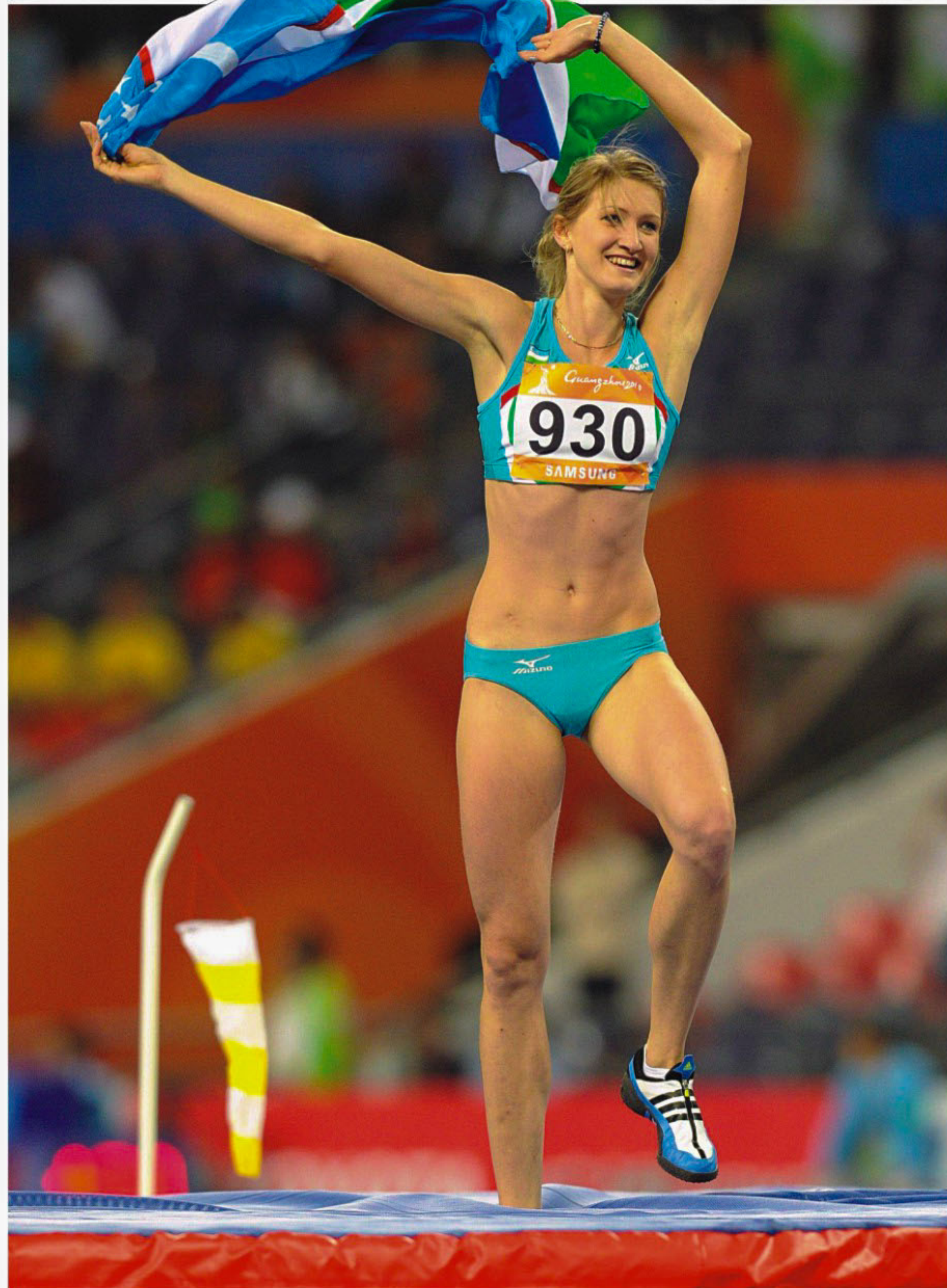
Should the national selectors include Mohammad Ashraful for the series against Zim?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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Golden girl Svetlana Radzivil of Uzbekistan waves the national flag as she celebrates after winning the women's high jump final at the 16th Asian Games in Guangzhou yesterday. (Story on page 18)

PHOTO: AFP

## MU chase top spot

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson is preparing to unleash a fit-again Wayne Rooney on the Premier League as Manchester United look to kick-start their title charge at Blackburn Rovers on Saturday.

Rooney made his first start for United since early October in Wednesday's Champions League trip to Glasgow, scoring from the penalty spot to secure a 1-0 victory over Rangers.

Ferguson admits Rooney is a long way from being the unstoppable force that saw him score 34 times in all competitions last season on his way to scooping the Players' Player of the Year award.

Yet the United boss plans to give Rooney as much game time as possible to restore him to full match sharpness.

"He needs games," said Ferguson. "The way we are going to do that is to keep him

on the pitch for 90 minutes. "That will continue now as we try to get him to his level. He is rusty, that is obvious, but it is a start for him."

United are currently level on points with Chelsea at the top of the table and can pile the pressure on the out-of-form champions with a victory at Blackburn, which could give them a three-point lead.

Chelsea, meanwhile, travel to Newcastle on Sunday with boss Carlo Ancelotti hoping his injury-hit side can snap a dismal run of results that has seen them beaten three times in four league matches.

Chelsea attacker Salmon Kalou has played down the speculation surrounding Ancelotti's position following the departure of assistant coach Ray Wilkins earlier this month.

"It has not been weird for us," said Kalou following Chelsea's 2-1 Champions League win over MSK Zilina at Stamford Bridge in mid-week. "Everything has been the same. We have trained like

normal. This weekend against Newcastle is a big game. We are back to winning ways and we have to continue. This weekend will be a good game again for us."

Arsenal can take fleeting possession of top spot if they

### FIXTURES

Saturday

(1500GMT unless otherwise stated):  
Aston Villa v Arsenal (1245GMT),  
Bolton v Blackpool, Everton v West Brom, Fulham v Birmingham, Man Utd v Blackburn, Stoke City v Man City, West Ham v Wigan Athletic, Wolves v Sunderland

Sunday

Newcastle v Chelsea (1330GMT),

manage a victory at Aston Villa in Saturday's early kick-off.

The Gunners' hopes of scoring an away victory have been dealt a blow, however, by injuries to captain Cesc Fabregas and Emmanuel Eboué, who both face spells on the sidelines.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is likely to have Dutch international Robin van Persie available for selection as the Gunners try to recover from last week's home defeat against Tottenham in the north London derby.

Spurs entertain Liverpool at White Hart Lane with confidence sky high after the away win at Arsenal and reaching the Champions League knockout rounds with ease in Wednesday's 3-0 win over Werder Bremen.

Spurs striker Peter Crouch, who rejoined Spurs from Liverpool in 2009, believes Tottenham have the talent to push for the top.

"Right from the start when I came to this club, I was looking around the dressing room thinking, 'How have we not achieved anything?', and I think it's only a matter of time," Crouch said.

"Last season, obviously finishing fourth was a great achievement but I think we can go one better and try to win something this year."

## Jose gears up for Clasico

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho hopes to end the club's recent woes against champions

Barcelona when the two bitter rivals lock horns in the season's first Clasico at Camp Nou on Monday.

Unbeaten Real lead the Spanish league by a point from Barcelona and the winner of the fixture would gain a significant edge in the title race, particularly as the dominant duo rarely slip up elsewhere, dropping just nine league points between them so far this season.

If Mourinho can win his maiden Clasico, his Real side would go four points clear, but Barca coach Pep Guardiola has a 100 per cent record in the fixture, including the famous 6-2 victory at the Santiago Bernabeu in May 2009.

Mourinho has master-minded wins over Barcelona in Europe with former clubs Chelsea and Inter Milan and can expect a hostile reception from the fans who watched his Inter outfit beat Guardiola's side in last season's Champions League semifinal.

"They (the Barcelona fans) will never forgive me for denying them the chance to win the Champions League final at the Santiago Bernabeu and I will get a hostile reception," said Mourinho.

"It is not easy facing

Barcelona. I beat them with Chelsea and Inter Milan but that was in cup competitions, which is easier."

All eyes will be on Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, who have set the league alight this season and are the top two scorers in the league.

Real's Portuguese star Ronaldo leads the scoring charts with 15 goals after a hat-trick in his side's 5-1 win over Athletic Bilbao last time out and he scored two more in the 4-0 Champions League win at Ajax on Tuesday.

Barcelona's Argentine Lionel Messi has 13 league goals after also scoring a hat-trick in his last league match as Barcelona thumped Almeria 8-0 and he has netted in his last 10 games in all competitions.

"The Clasico is an important game for us and we are favourites because we are at home," said Barcelona midfielder Xavi. "We have a lot of respect for Madrid but we are playing well and in fine form."

Barcelona have won their last six league matches, scor-

### FIXTURES

Saturday

Real Zaragoza v Villarreal (1700GMT),  
Sevilla v Getafe (1900GMT), Atletico Madrid v Espanyol (2100GMT)

Sunday

(1600GMT unless otherwise stated)  
Hercules v Levante, Racing Santander v Deportivo La Coruna, Real Mallorca v Malaga, Sporting Gijon v Real Sociedad, Athletic Bilbao v Osasuna (1800GMT), Valencia v Almeria (2000GMT)

Monday

(2000GMT)

## It's going to get tough

AFP, Rome



AC Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso believes things are going to start getting tougher for the Serie A leaders as they travel to Sampdoria this weekend.

Milan opened up a three point gap at the top of the table last week with a 1-0 defeat of Fiorentina, coupled with Lazio's 1-1 draw at Parma.

Things are going well for Massimiliano Allegri's team as they also qualified for the Champions League knock-out stages in midweek following a 2-0 win at Auxerre.

However, Sampdoria is a notoriously difficult destination for visiting teams and, what's more, Gattuso suspects there is widespread determination to beat the leaders.

"Now things are going to get tough," he warned.

"All the teams we'll play against will have the attitude that they're playing the leaders and they'll give 100 per cent."

"They also did it before because playing against Milan is always very important but when you're top every match played is one less towards the final objective."

"With every game the three points become more important."

Gattuso also played tribute to his team's

battling spirit given that they have been missing some top players at various stages this season.

"Right now we're missing a player who for me defines football: Andrea Pirlo," added Gattuso of his great friend.

"The fact that he's missing and we're still getting results says a lot about what makes this sport special."

"You also need a lot of luck. For example, against Auxerre we didn't play well but you could see how much we wanted to win."

"When you have such motivation no-one is indispensable and me even less so."

Sampdoria has always been a difficult place to go to but Domenico Di Carlo's team have been highly inconsistent this season.

They have only lost at home once, to Napoli, but have also struggled a lot, being held to scoreless home draws by the likes of Chievo, Catania and

Udinese. Overall they have won only four games out of 13 and drawn seven.

Sampdoria are also still without star forward Antonio Cassano, who remains suspended by his club for having insulted president Riccardo Garrone. The club is trying to terminate the 28-year-old's contract.

Second-placed Lazio host Catania while third-placed Napoli are at Udinese in games that look decidedly winnable on paper.

## C'Ron predicts Real win

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona are a tough proposition but Real Madrid will gain the upper hand when the Spanish giants clash in the first Clasico of the season on Monday, Real's Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo predicted Thursday.

"Barcelona is still a very difficult team. Barca is a very strong team, especially when they play at home. They are there to fight for the league title," he told reporters on the sidelines of a promotional event.

"We know they are playing at a good level and for this reason it will be an important and beautiful game. May the best team win. And the best team will be Madrid," the 2008 FIFA World Player of the Year added.

Ronaldo rejected suggestions that the match would be decisive like a final, claiming it is just "another match".

"We have one point more, we are playing away but we are going with the intention of getting a result. It is not a final because there are still many matches left," the 25-year-old said.

"The two teams are very good, they are very close but with a distinct playing style. Barca use more 'tiqui-taca', we play more with the goal of going as far as possible as quickly as possible," he added, using the Spanish term used to describe Barcelona's short-passing style.

The Catalan side's double victory in the fixture last year was crucial in determining the outcome of La Liga, which Barcelona retained by the margin of one point.

Ronaldo has never scored against Barcelona and he failed to impress in last season's two 'Clasicos' but he is in astonishing form this season.



Real Madrid footballers Pepe (L), Cristiano Ronaldo (C) and Marcelo attend the Euroleague basketball match between Real Madrid and Olympiacos at the Caja Magica Sportshall on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Rooney says sorry to fans

AFP, Glasgow

Wayne Rooney has tried to make his peace with Manchester United's fans by saying sorry for the way his contract talks were concluded last month.

The England striker appeared to question United's desire and left open the possibility he might move to local rivals Manchester City.

It left a sour taste with many United fans who, when Rooney did extend his Old Trafford contract by five years, felt he toyed with their emotions in the hope of getting a better financial deal.

Rooney, before scoring his match-winning penalty in United's 1-0 Champions League victory over Rangers at Ibrox here on Wednesday, said: "I feel like I have apologised to the fans but everyone keeps saying that I haven't."

"If that is the case, then I apologise for my side of things."

"I have made my point clear since I signed my contract that I am committed to this club for the long term. I want to be successful here."