



French star Franck Ribery (C) scores the second goal against Iceland during their international friendly at the Hainaut Stadium in Valenciennes on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy drop Criscito



AFP, Rome

Domenico Criscito will not be part of Italy's Euro 2012 squad following his implication in the "Calciocommesse" match-fixing scandal, Italian football federation vice-president Demetrio Albertini said Monday.

Criscito was handed a notice of indictment in a dawn raid on Monday in which his hotel room at Italy's pre-Euro base near Florence was searched by police.

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli was due to announce his 23-man squad later on Monday but Albertini has confirmed Criscito will not be a part of it.

"It was a decision shared by Prandelli and the federation," said Albertini. "He (Criscito) is disappointed about the repercussions on the national team and the dressing room."

"He explained certain things to me and I believe his version and in his innocence."

In a series of co-ordinated raids, 19 people were held by police following an investigation into illegal betting by the Cremona public prosecutor.

Of those, 14 were arrested, three were held under house arrest and two more ordered to present themselves to police.

Lazio captain Stefano Mauri and Padova midfielder Omar Milanetto, formerly of Genoa, were amongst those arrested.

Juventus coach Antonio Conte was submitted to a home search, as was Chievo captain Sergio Pellissier.

But the main drama was at Italy's Coverciano base, just outside Florence, where police swooped at 6:35 am (0435 GMT).

Criscito's room was searched, although it is believed nothing was taken away.

Cremona public prosecutor Stefano Di Martino told a news conference that no other national team players were involved and that Criscito could "calmly go to the Euros", as he was merely helping police with the investigation.

His alleged involvement relates to a meeting he had in May last year, when playing for Genoa, with two of the clubs "ultra" fans, then team-mate Giuseppe Sculli and a Bosnian with a criminal record.

The Calciocommesse affair is believed to involve a group of Hungarians, a group of "Zingari" -- Gypsies in Italy -- and the heads of the crime syndicate in Singapore.

Two Hungarians were arrested on Monday while three others were already behind bars, one of whom has been co-operating with police.

Di Martino stressed that Criscito has not been charged with anything and the player's agent Andrea D'Amico said his client was feeling calm.

But Prandelli is a stickler for discipline and has previously excluded players from Italy duty when they were serving club bans.

Criscito, 25, who plays for Zenit St Petersburg in Russia, has largely been the first-choice left-back under Prandelli, although he has used several players in that position since taking over from Marcello Lippi following the 2010 World Cup.

The European Championships kick-off in less than two weeks while Italy play friendlies against Luxembourg on Tuesday and Russia on Friday.

Barry ruled out

AFP, London

England midfielder Gareth Barry was on Monday ruled out of Euro 2012 after sustaining a tear to his lower abdomen during his team's 1-0 victory over Norway in a friendly.

Everton's Phil Jagielka has been called up as his replacement, the Football Association confirmed.

"I am very disappointed to lose Gareth, not only was he a member of my original 23-man squad but he has featured prominently in the England team over the last few years," said manager Roy Hodgson.

"I wish him a speedy recovery."

Prandelli trims squad

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli on Monday trimmed his squad to 25 players ahead of Tuesday's UEFA deadline for submitting Euro 2012 lists.

The current list of players have been selected for Tuesday's friendly against Luxembourg in Parma. The two who don't make the final cut will be kept on as reserves.

Uncapped youngsters Ezequiel Schelotto and Marco Verratti were two of those dropped alongside Criscito from the original 32-man list.

The others were Palermo goalkeeper Emiliano Viviano, Rubin Kazan defender Salvatore Bocchetti, Cagliari defender Davide Astori and Atlanta midfielder Luca Cigarini.

Uncapped forward pair Mattia Destra of Siena and Juventus's Emanuele Giaccherini both made the cut, as did Torino's Angelo Ogbonna. The 24-year-old of Nigerian descent is the only player in the squad not playing top flight football.

SQUAD
Goalkeepers:
Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus), Salvatore Sirigu (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Morgan De Sanctis (Napoli).
Defenders:
Cristian Maggio (Napoli), Ignazio Abate (AC Milan), Federico Balzaretti (Palermo), Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus), Andrea Barzagli (Juventus), Giorgio Chiellini (Juventus), Andrea Ranocchia (Inter Milan), Angelo Ogbonna (Torino).
Midfielders:
Andrea Pirlo (Juventus), Claudio Marchisio (Juventus), Emanuele Giaccherini (Juventus), Daniele De Rossi (Roma), Thiago Motta (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Antonio Nocerino (AC Milan), Riccardo Montolivo (Fiorentina), Alessandro Diamanti (Bologna).
Strikers:
Antonio Cassano (AC Milan), Mario Balotelli (Manchester City/ENG), Sebastian Giovinco (Parma), Antonio Di

EURO2012
P R E V I E W
Expectation is high

AFP, Berlin

Germany arrive at Euro 2012 with a perfect qualifying record but Joachim Loew's young guns still need to prove themselves in a tough Group B alongside the Netherlands, Portugal and Denmark.

Having won the Euro title three times, Germany are the most successful team in the history of the European Championships and last lifted the trophy in 1996 after victories in 1972 and 1980.

Loew's side earned 10 wins from 10 in their qualification campaign, scoring 34 goals in the process. They now aim to go one better than the Euro 2008 final when they lost 1-0 to Spain thanks to a single goal from Fernando Torres.

Since taking charge in 2006, Loew has led his country to the European runners-up spot in Vienna four years ago and third place at the 2010 World Cup.

Expectation is high in Germany, especially after their 100 per cent qualifying record and last season's friendly wins over Brazil and Holland.

"We have many young players, who have never played a big tournament," said Loew. "It's a similar situation to the 2010 World Cup."

"An advantage is that our foundation is better than in 2008 or even 2010, with our philosophy now solidified over the past two years. We have a very balanced squad with a good age structure."

In the past, Germany have earned a reputation for

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DAYS
TO GO

frugal efficiency but using the skills of midfielder stars Bastian Schweinsteiger, Mesut Ozil and Thomas Mueller, Loew has fashioned a formidable attacking unit able to compete with the world's best.

"The challenge for us is to improve at this high level," he added.

Loew is a fan of promoting young talent and named 18-year-old Schalke 04 midfielder Julian Draxler in his provisional squad, alongside 20-year-old Borussia Moenchengladbach goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Weaknesses were exposed when Loew's under-strength team lost 2-1 at home to France in February's friendly, with problems in defence and getting players into dangerous positions.

Nevertheless, Schalke defender Benedikt Hoewedes said it was better to have problems exposed before the championships.

"Our aim is still to try to go all the way at Euro 2012," he added.

One chink in the German armour is at centre-back. Arsenal's Per Mertesacker will have to prove his fitness after being sidelined by torn ankle ligaments since February.

Defensive partners Christoph Metzelder and Arne Friedrich have dropped out of contention.

Bayern Munich youngsters Jerome Boateng and Holger Badstuber, plus Borussia Dortmund's Mats Hummels, have all been impressive in the Bundesliga

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Silva misses Villa

AFP, Madrid

Manchester City winger David Silva says he can't imagine the Spanish squad without top scorer David Villa, who will miss Euro 2012 due to injury, and warns winning the tournament will not be easy.

Villa -- who has scored 51 goals in 82 internationals making him Spain's all-time record goalscorer -- was left out of Spain's Euro 2012 squad as he failed to get back to full fitness after breaking a leg in December.

"It is a new situation for us. The truth is I don't know what life for the national team will be like without Villa," Silva said in an interview published Monday in Spanish sports daily Marca.

"Hopefully it will be the same but 'El Guaje' is a very important player for us, he is pure goal. We are going to miss him both on and off the pitch," added Silva, referring to the Barcelona striker by his nickname.

Spain are looking to become the first nation to win three international trophies in a row after winning Euro 2008 and the 2010 World Cup.

"We can always dream about it, of course, but we have to be conscious that other teams are equally strong, of the potential of the other teams and that winning is very demanding and you must suffer a great deal," said Silva.

"It can happen, but nobody can think that it is going to be easy," the 26-year-old added.

Sevilla striker Alvaro Negredo will effectively fill the void left by Villa's absence after Spain coach Vicente del Bosque on Sunday appointed the player for the final striker's spot in Spain's squad for Euro 2012.

Four members of the 2008 squad are missing this time around, with talismanic defender Carles Puyol also out due to injury and Carlos Marchena and Joan Capdevila no longer in favour.

Spain opens its title defence against Italy on June 10 in Gdansk, Poland, before facing the Republic of Ireland four days later and Croatia on June 18 in its other Group C games.

Lacklustre France

Football

AFP, Valencia

France battled back from two goals down at half-time to beat Iceland 3-2 and avoid a humiliating defeat in the first of three warm-ups for Euro 2012 here on Sunday.

Iceland, ranked a lowly 131 in FIFA's world table, stunned their hosts when Birkir Bjarnason put them into a 28th minute lead, with Ajax striker Kolbeinn Sigthorsson doubling up five minutes later.

Whatever words of wisdom coach Laurent Blanc came up with at the interval evidently sank home as the second half was only seven minutes old when Lille defender Mathieu Debuchy reduced the deficit.

But France had then to wait until the 85th minute before Franck Ribery put them back on level terms with a lob for the Bayern Munich star's first goal for his country since April, 2009.

Valencia back Adil Rami bagged the winner three minutes from time, volleying home Olivier Giroud'd knockdown to extend France's unbeaten run to 19 matches.

France's next prep outing is against Serbia on Thursday in Reims, with their third and final warm-up scheduled for June 5 in Le Mans against Estonia.

Blanc's men are drawn in Group D at the European Championships and they begin their campaign in Donetsk against England on June 11 followed by co-hosts Ukraine and Sweden.

A lacklustre display by most of the French side, the one notable exception being Karim Benzema who had a good match, will give

Blanc plenty to think about with only two weeks to go before battle commences in Ukraine-Poland.

He said: "We defended very badly in the first half. I changed lots of players in the second half who brought in a different style and with Iceland getting tired it enabled us to win in the end."

"We can be satisfied with certain aspects and less satisfied with others."

Blanc conceded a defeat would have dented his team's confidence.

"Confidence comes when you win so in that respect the result was a good thing. I've seen a lot of teams lose their first warm-up. We're not yet ready for June 11, physically we're not ready which explains our problems in defence."

Despite the scare Sochaux midfielder Marvin Martin put a positive spin on the performance.

He reflected: "It was difficult but it's fine, we saw a team that didn't let go. We continue our positive set of results. Friendly games are played at international level and defensively they (Iceland) weren't bad."

Manchester City midfielder Samir Nasri added: "After eight days of training we all had heavy legs. That, with the heat, weighed against us. But after, we felt better and better. It was very important to win. We showed character and showed that we were ready physically because we made the difference at the end of the match."

"We're still in the preparation stage," said Benzema.

"We'll be ready as expected for June 11."

Ukraine plans rain free Euros

REUTERS, Kiev

Ukraine is planning to fire rockets to break up rain clouds if bad weather threatens to upset soccer matches during next month's Euro 2012 tournament, a government official said on Monday.

"Our (missile) batteries are being prepared for dispersing rain clouds," the official, who declined to be named, told Reuters.

On May 9 when Ukraine celebrated World War Two Victory Day, the airforce sent up an Antonov-30 cargo transporter to disperse a build-up of rain cloud by spraying it with chemicals, though no rockets were fired.

For the moment though, weather forecasters are predicting only dry, warm weather for at least the first two European Championship games to be played in Ukraine.

"We expect there will be no rain in Ukraine on June 9. The temperature is likely to be between 20 and 24 Celsius degrees (68 to 75 Fahrenheit)," Anatoly Prokopenko, deputy head of Ukraine's State Weather Forecast Centre, told Reuters.



PHOTO: AFP

Spain winger David Silva practices shooting during a training session in Schruns yesterday.

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Venue: Bangabandhu