

Venezuela hold Japan

REUTERS, Tokyo

Asian champions Japan were held 1-1 by Venezuela on Wednesday in the first of two warm-up matches before the resumption of the final round of regional World Cup qualifiers.

Yasuhito Endo put the Blue Samurai in front in the 14th minute at a sellout Sapporo Dome, sweeping home after a dazzling run down the right from Yuichi Komano.

Spain-based striker Miku pegged Japan back, twisting while on the ground to deftly poke the loose ball past goalkeeper Eiji Kawashima with the outside of his right boot.

Keisuke Honda could have put Japan 2-0 up well before the halftime whistle, only for his left-foot drive to thump off the post.

Manchester United's pre-season signing Shinji Kagawa flashed a header just past the post on the hour mark. It proved costly as Miku struck moments later.

Kagawa also contrived to miss an open goal in the 75th minute, his shot looping up against the crossbar with the goal at his mercy.

They overpowered Oman 3-0 and Jordan 6-0 at home before being held 1-1 in Australia in June in their first three games in the final round of Asian 2014 World Cup qualifiers.



Venezuela forward Nicolas Fedor (R) slides the ball into the net to make it 1-1 during their international friendly against Japan in Sapporo yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Diego eyes China job

Football

REUTERS, Undated

Argentine soccer great Diego Maradona has underlined his desire to coach in China after arriving in the country for an eight-day charity trip, local media reported.

The 51-year-old, Argentina's head coach at the 2010 World Cup, was sacked by United Arab Emirates club Al Wasl last month but appears keen on a job in the Far East.

"I would like to coach in China," Maradona told a news conference in Beijing, the China Daily reported. "I wish to contribute to the development of China's youth soccer."

One of Maradona's coterie of agents had sounded out the Chinese earlier this year with a view of eventually landing the national team job, the newspaper said.

During his visit, Maradona, who led his country to the 1986 World Cup as a player and is regarded as one of the game's greatest ever, will hold talks with Chinese FA boss Wei Di.

A controversial figure who has suffered serious health issues and overcome drug addiction, Maradona was fired as Argentina coach after losing 4-0 to Germany in the quarterfinals of the 2010 tournament.

Chinese soccer has seen an influx of big-name foreign players and coaches, including Sergio Batista, the man who took over the Argentina job from Maradona, now coach of Shanghai Shenhua.

The big-spending Chinese Super League club boast former Chelsea strikers Nicolas Anelka and Didier Drogba, while other clubs have also been splashing the cash.

Shanghai's rivals Guangzhou Evergrande appointed Italy's former World Cup winning coach Marcello Lippi.

'Leave Messi in peace'

AFP, Frankfurt

Argentina coach Alejandro Sabello says star player Lionel Messi needs to be left in peace and one should "talk to him as little as possible" as the South American giants get set to face Germany in a friendly here on Wednesday.

When asked whether the Barcelona icon had changed since being appointed captain by Sabello, he replied: "No, not at all. I see him as calm, content and happy. He needs to be left alone and to talk to him as little as possible because if he is happy and content, then that is the best thing for everyone".

Messi has been in imperious form at international level in recent matches and has scored eight goals in his last four outings, including a hat-trick during the 4-3 win over arch rivals Brazil.

Sabello has given little away in regards to his tactics for Wednesday's match but admits he will likely use two or three strikers in an attack-

Barca look to Pep spirit

AFP, Madrid



LFP

Tito Vilanova will lead Barcelona into unknown territory in the coming season as the Catalans attempt to progress after four successful years under Pep Guardiola.

The pressure will be intense as the largely unknown coach takes over a legacy of 14 titles in 4 seasons left by his friend and colleague. He goes into the new season looking to stem a resurgent Madrid, who finished 9 points clear of the Catalans as La Liga champions last time around.

Vilanova trained as a youth with Guardiola at the club before the two took separate paths as players, Guardiola being by far the more successful, before they came together again in 2007 to take charge of the club's B side.

A year later and Vilanova was Guardiola's assistant as he took over the first team and a golden era in the club's history began.

The naming of Vilanova is one of continuity at a club proud of instilling a unique passing style of play at all levels.

How much of that success over those four years can be attributed to Vilanova is impossible to gauge but now

his time has arrived.

The home-grown nature of Vilanova's appointment is an approach adopted throughout the club.

The only addition so far to their squad is the return of full-back Jordi Alba from Valencia for a fee of 14 million euros.

Alba was rejected by the club as a schoolboy and continues a trend in recent years whereby Cesc Fabregas and Gerard Pique have returned after progressing elsewhere.

One player to leave is midfielder Seydou Keita. Adored by Guardiola for his versatility, the Malian midfielder has gone to play in China leaving Vilanova with the problem how to replace him.

A number of possibilities including Athletic Bilbao's Javi Martinez and Arsenal's Alex Song have been mooted but as yet no signing has been made.

A chronic injury list was cited as badly affecting Barca last season.

The most important loss was that of forward David Villa in December who suffered a broken tibia as his side were crowned FIFA World Club Cup winners.

Villa's return was delayed and he failed to make it in time to lead Spain's attack at Euro 2012. He has managed one pre-season game in a 2-0 win at Dynamo Bucharest and his fitness will

be key to Barca's start.

In his absence Barca relied heavily on Lionel Messi's 50 league goals and ran out of striking options towards the end of last season as they attempted to unlock teams without a recognised forward.

After the game in Bucharest Vilanova admitted as much and revealed he was pleased with the standard his players had reached.

"We missed Villa last season, he's very important to us, but the team is at a good level and we are going well, we have had a good four weeks training together and that has helped us," he said.

If Villa is not able to hit the ground running the early form of Chilean Alexis Sanchez will be vital in his second full season at the club.

Messi will return in possibly the best condition ever after scoring five goals in four games in pre-season.

Without a World Cup, Copa America or Olympic Games to play for the Argentine star completed all but one of his side's games and will be raring to go after his first significant rest in a number of years.

Club captain Carles Puyol and midfielder Thiago Alcantara both missed out on international duty at Euro 2012 and the London Olympics through injury and will also be keen to impress early on.

Muamba calls it quits

AFP, London

Bolton Wanderers midfielder Fabrice Muamba has retired from playing professional football on health grounds, the English second-tier club said on their website Thursday.

The 24-year-old collapsed during a match away to Tottenham Hotspur in March and his heart then stopped beating for 78 minutes.

Democratic Republic of Congo-born Muamba's recovery was hailed as miraculous but there were always questions as to whether he could play again.

Sneijder new Dutch captain

AFP, Brussels

Holland's freshly appointed coach Luis Van Gaal has named Inter Milan's Wesley Sneijder as his new captain for Wednesday's friendly against Belgium and for the upcoming World Cup qualification campaign, he said Tuesday.

The 28-year-old who won the 2010 Champions League under Jose Mourinho before helping Holland to the World Cup final in South Africa counts 87 caps and 24 goals to his name and takes over from previous captain Mark Van Bommel, who is not included in Van Gaal's latest squad.



France star Franck Ribery (R) takes part in a training session in Le Havre on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bayern stand by Ribery

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich have given their backing to embattled France winger Franck Ribery, after he and compatriot Karim Benzema were sent for trial for allegedly soliciting an underage prostitute.

The Bavarian giants' sporting director Matthias Sammer told German sports news agency SID that they were aware of the situation and "we will tell him that we stand by him and that he will get our best support".

An investigating magistrate in Paris on Tuesday ruled that Ribery, who has played for Bayern since 2007, and Real Madrid forward Benzema would be sent for trial with seven others over the affair, which broke before the 2010 World Cup.

During an investigation into call-girls frequenting a Parisian bar, Zahia Dehar told police that Ribery and Benzema paid her for sex while she was 16, although she said the players were unaware that she was not 18.

Some of those facing trial have been charged with "aggravated pimping".

Soliciting sex with an under-age prostitute is punishable by up to three years in prison and a maximum 45,000-euro (£35,000, \$55,000) fine.

Ribery's lawyer told AFP that she was astonished by the magistrate's decision, after a previous judge had said there was no case to answer against the two French internationals.

"This decision is as surprising as it is unfair with regard to the contents of the dossier and the requests of the prosecutor's office. But I remain confident about the outcome of the process," Sophie Bottai told AFP.



STAR Cricket

ICC U-19 World Cup

England v Nepal

Live from 5:30am

England v South Africa

Third Test, Day 1

Live from 4:00pm

STAR Sports

Cincinnati Masters

Round 16

Live from 9:00pm

ESPN

Sportscentre India

Sports News



ICC U-19 World Cup

Bangladesh v Namibia

Time: 5:30am