

Keane blow for Ireland

REUTERS, Dublin

Ireland captain Robbie Keane will miss Friday's World Cup soccer qualifier with Germany through injury, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) said on Thursday, making him the sixth senior member of Giovanni Trapattoni's squad to be ruled out.

Los Angeles Galaxy striker Keane, Ireland's all-time leading goalscorer, suffered an Achilles injury this week and the FAI said he would hopefully be available for the trip to the Faroe Islands next Tuesday.

Keane joins fellow striker Kevin Doyle, central defensive partners Richard Dunne and Sean St Ledger, and midfielders Glenn Whelan and James McClean on the sidelines for the home game against the Group C leaders.

Trapattoni will name his replacement captain and starting line-up for the game later on Thursday.

Aogo reveals depression

AFP, Berlin

Hamburg's Germany defender Dennis Aogo has revealed his three-week break from football at the start of the Bundesliga season was down to depression.

"At the end of the pre-season, I found it harder and harder to get up," Aogo, 25, told German daily Bild having returned to training with his club.

"I thought it was just a phase and I tried to drag myself through it, but there came a point when that was no longer possible.

"When the body stops working, the problem goes to the head.

"I was depressed and I no longer felt myself."

Having made the last of his 10 appearances for Germany against France in a friendly in February, Aogo played the first two Bundesliga games of the season before he was sent to Innsbruck, Austria, to be treated for an infection.

"I was run down for the first ten days, then the energy and motivation started to come back," he said.

"I ran every day, rode a bike and hiked.

"Today, I can say that I feel really good and that is a great feeling."

Hamburg are eighth in the Bundesliga and their next league game is home to Hamburg on October 21.

Depression amongst professional footballers is a hot topic in Germany after it emerged former national goalkeeper Robert Enke suffered for years with the mental illness before his suicide in November 2009.

Spain could deploy Javi

REUTERS, Minsk



Champions Spain may deploy a converted midfielder alongside central defender Sergio Ramos in Friday's World Cup Group I qualifier in Belarus, coach Vicente Del Bosque said on Thursday.

With Carles Puyol and Gerard Pique sidelined by injury, Del Bosque has only one other recognised centre back in the squad in Raul Albiol but he has barely featured for his club Real Madrid in recent months.

The other option is to use midfielders Sergio Busquets or Javi Martinez who both have experience in central defence, particularly Martinez who mostly played there last season at Athletic Bilbao before reverting to midfield for his new club Bayern Munich.

"It could be there will be players who play a different role from the one at their club and that they play out of their ideal position," Del Bosque told a news conference in Minsk when asked where Busquets might play.

"It will be because we believe they can do the job perfectly well and we won't ask them to do anything that conflicts with their particular characteristics."

Spain won their opening game 1-0 in Georgia, extending their winning streak in European Championship and World Cup qualifiers to 23 matches.

They last failed to win a qualifier in a 1-1 draw with Iceland in Reykjavik in September 2007.

Spain went on to become the first team to win back-to-back European Championships with a World Cup in between and will be firm favourites to retain their global title in Brazil in 2014.

After returning from Belarus, Del Bosque's men host France on Tuesday at Atletico Madrid's Calderon stadium in a match that could go a long way to deciding who wins the group.



Spain star Fernando Torres (L) and fullback Alvaro Arbeloa attend a press conference in Minsk yesterday on the eve of their World Cup qualifier against Belarus.

PHOTO: AFP

Clash of the titans Mighty meet minnows

AFP, Paris



After climbing three spots to fourth in the latest FIFA world rankings, Argentina can further enhance their World Cup prospects when they host reigning South American champions Uruguay as qualifying for Brazil 2014 continues on Friday.

The showdown in Mendoza pits a pair of two-time World Cup winners together in what is the first meeting between the sides since Uruguay ousted Argentina on penalties in the quarterfinals of last summer's Copa America.

Despite being held to a 1-1 draw in Peru last month, Argentina are unbeaten in their past five qualifiers and find themselves top of the group with 14 points from seven matches, while Uruguay occupy the final automatic qualification spot as they lie fourth, two points behind La Albiceleste.

Sergio Aguero returns for Argentina after missing fixtures against Paraguay and Peru through injury, but with the vast attacking riches at coach Alejandro Sabella's disposal, Carlos Tevez's international exile continues.

Other notable omissions include Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Javier Pastore and Newcastle defender Fabricio Coloccini, while Ezequiel Lavezzi is an injury casualty.

Uruguay come into the encounter in stuttering form, having picked up just a solitary point from their last two matches, one of which resulted in a 4-0 drubbing in Colombia.

They will be without injured duo Gaston Ramirez and Diego Perez as well as the suspended Alvaro Pereira.

But despite the prospect of trying to shackle the likes of Lionel Messi, who has 10 goals in his last seven appearances for his country, Gonzalo Higuain -- the leading scorer in qualifying with six goals -- and Aguero, La Celeste captain Diego Lugano reasoned that his side also have the firepower to seriously expose their opponents.

"Obviously Uruguay have the weapons to counter those of Argentina," said PSG defender Lugano.

"If they have the best attack in the world, with Messi at the head, Uruguay must have the second or third, with (Luis) Suarez and (Diego) Forlan."

Lugano did however sound a note of caution to his teammates, stressing the importance of sticking to their fundamentals if they are to succeed.

"Our game is based on physical aggression. I think we lost this in the last games against Colombia and Ecuador. There was a little letdown from the team.

"In this match we have to return to having this physical pressure and try to neutralize the Argentine players," explained Lugano.

Combative Argentine midfielder Javier Mascherano said he expects another eagerly contested encounter in Mendoza.

"For us the game against Uruguay is a classic. The last matches we've played against them were hotly disputed.

"They are one of the strongest sides in the continent," added the Barcelona player.

With the qualifying competition approaching the halfway point, Mascherano suggested two victories -- Argentina play Chile four days later in Santiago -- in the next week would position the 1978 and 1986 World Cup winners well for the tournament in Brazil.

AFP, London



Holders Spain face a tricky trip to Belarus in World Cup 2014 qualifying on Friday when a host of top European sides take on unheralded nations as they bid to avoid sizeable shocks en route to Brazil.

The Spanish know only too well that their Group I game in Minsk is far from a foregone conclusion after midfielder Javi Martinez's club side Bayern Munich lost 3-1 at Belarussian champions BATE Borisov in the Champions League last week.

A late 1-0 win in Georgia for the world and European champions in their group opener last month was also a reminder of the tiresome cliché that there are "no easy games", even if the Netherlands and England do have simple-looking matches.

The Dutch, the 2010 runners-up, host tiny Andorra in Group D while England, who drew 1-1 at home with Ukraine in a lacklustre second Group H game, welcome a San Marino side joint bottom of the FIFA rankings before a tougher test in Poland on Tuesday.

Steven Gerrard is suspended after a red card against Ukraine last month so Frank Lampard is set to take the armband with Chelsea club mate Ashley Cole also hoping to play despite an expletive tweet against the English Football Association.

Martinez warned not just his Spain side but the whole of Europe to the potential of banana skins, with six BATE players likely to start for Belarus.

"Because they have so many BATE players in the squad probably they will play in a similar way," Martinez told a news conference.

"BATE are a team that look to play on the counter attack, they are physically very strong and they don't give you many scoring chances."

FIXTURES

Friday (all times GMT):
Macedonia v Croatia (1830), Serbia v Belgium (1830), Wales v Scotland (1845), Czech Republic v Malta (1600), Armenia v Italy (1700), Bulgaria v Denmark (1800), Republic of Ireland v Germany (1845), Kazakhstan v Austria (1600), Faroe Islands v Sweden (1600), Netherlands v Andorra (1830), Estonia v Hungary (1830), Turkey v Romania (1730), Switzerland v Norway (1830), Albania v Iceland (1700), Slovenia v Cyprus (1845), Russia v Portugal (1500), Luxembourg v Israel (1900), Greece v Bosnia-Herzegovina (1845), Slovakia v Latvia (1815), Liechtenstein v Lithuania (1730), England v San Marino (1900), Moldova v Ukraine (1800), Finland v

Italy and Germany have similar matches to Spain's, ones they should easily win but that on occasions provide a bolt from the blue.

The Germans travel to injury-hit Ireland looking to make it three wins from three in Group C and Euro 2012 runners-up Italy visit unknowns Armenia in Group B.

Germany's Mario Goetze and Lukas Podolski are nursing minor knocks but will be fit for the Dublin clash, however, defender Mats

Hummels is out and captain Philipp Lahm is suspended.

"Even despite the missing players we can handle any absence because of our team's strength," said assistant coach Hansi Flick, whose outfit host Sweden next Tuesday.

One player expected to fit for arguably the juiciest-looking clash on Friday is Real Madrid's Portugal forward Cristiano Ronaldo, who is in line to face Russia away in Group F having almost recovered from a shoulder injury sustained against Barcelona.

Defender Pepe is a doubt for Portugal with a thigh problem.

In another intriguing encounter, Belgium - many pundits' outside tip to shine when the soccer carnival rolls into Brazil in two years' time - go to Serbia in Group A but giant afro-haired midfielder Marouane Fellaini is injured.

Among other matches in European qualification on Friday, Group B rivals Bulgaria and Denmark clash while the Czech Republic are at home to Malta.

Sweden go to fellow Scandinavians the Faroe Islands looking for bags of goals in Group C.

British duo Wales and Scotland do battle in Cardiff in Group A hoping to gain the upper hand and put themselves in an improved position for Tuesday's bumper round of matches.

The standout game next week is Spain hosting France, who face Japan in a friendly at the Stade de France on Friday.



France forwards Karim Benzema (L) and Jeremy Menez jog with balls during a training session in Clairefontaine on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Blatter invites Muamba

REUTERS, London

Cardiac arrest survivor Fabrice Muamba has been invited by FIFA president Sepp Blatter to Zurich next month to discuss a possible role with world soccer's governing body.

The former Bolton Wanderers midfielder collapsed on the pitch during an FA Cup quarterfinal against Tottenham Hotspur in March and his heart stopped beating for 78 minutes. He recovered but was forced to retire as a player in August.

Speaking to reporters at the Leaders in Football business convention in London he said he now found going to matches tough emotionally, but was attracted to a career in sports politics.

"I like this kind of side of it, making decisions," the former England Under-21 player said. "I have a meeting with Sepp Blatter next week (October 30), hopefully he can get a job for me."

Muamba was given a Brazil No.9 shirt by World Cup winner Ronaldo earlier in the day.

Viera slates young stars

Football

AFP, London

Former Arsenal and France star Patrick Vieira claims young English players no longer dream of representing their national side.

In his role as Manchester City's football development director, Vieira is in close contact with the next generation of Premier League stars and he is convinced there is no longer a desire among the sport's youngsters to make an impact on the international stage.

Vieira was always passionate about playing for France and helped his country win the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 European Championship, but the 36-year-old does not see the same determination in teenagers these days.

"When I grew up in France, I wanted to play for the French national team. That was my target, my dream, and I don't think this is the same for the under-16s, under-18s in England," he told several newspapers in England on Thursday.

"I don't think the young players are dreaming of playing for the national team any more. I don't know the answer but, from the outside, I believe that, in England, they are not as proud as they used to be."

Vieira, who won 107 caps for France, has also warned it could take more than a decade for the English Football Association's new national centre at St George's Park in Burton upon Trent, central England to show tangible results.

He welcomed the move to centralise football development in England, but believes the FA must improve coaching in order to close the gap on the top nations like Spain, Germany and France.

Lampard ruled out

AFP, London

England midfielder Frank Lampard has been ruled out the 2014 World Cup qualifier against San Marino with a knee injury, the Football Association said on Thursday.

England face the European minnows on Friday, four days before a sterner test against joint Group H leaders Poland.

"Frank Lampard has returned to his club for further treatment and will not be available for England's FIFA World Cup qualifier with San Marino," the FA said on their website.

"The Chelsea midfielder will return to the England squad on Sunday for assessment ahead of the away qualifier with Poland on Tuesday."

The injury to vice captain Lampard has opened a debate as to who will lead out England at Wembley on Friday, with usual captain Steven Gerrard suspended for the match.

The two most likely candidates to fill the role are Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney and Manchester City goalkeeper Joe Hart.



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Time: 3:30pm
Mohammedan v Sk Russel
Time: 5:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Bangladesh Police v Rampur Boys
Time: 3:30pm