

WENGER PLAYS DOWN WILSHERE CLUB BRAWL

LONDON: Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger yesterday played down a late-night scrape involving Jack Wilshere and revealed that the midfielder will make his long-awaited return to action this week. Wilshere, 24, was photographed speaking to police in the early hours of Sunday morning after reportedly being rejected from a nightclub in central London.

The England midfielder will play in the club's under-21 fixture against Newcastle United on Friday and Wenger feels that the nightclub incident did not merit the media attention it received. "I've spoken

to him. It looks to be taken out of proportion a little bit," Wenger told a press conference ahead of his side's Premier League clash with West Ham United tomorrow. "These are matters that we like to keep internal. This is a completely private matter. I don't know really what happened."

He added: "There was no training session the next day. He had an off day (day off). You can accept that sometimes the players go out, when they are free the next day, over the weekend. "Overall, what is positive is that he works very, very

hard. The news looks quite good. I think he will have a good test tomorrow night."

Wilshere has not played this season after sustaining a fractured shin in pre-season. His list of injuries is only slightly longer than his record of off-pitch incidents, but Wenger believes that it is fitness concerns, rather than disciplinary matters, that are the only barrier to a successful career.

"At the moment I believe he's a real football brain, Jack Wilshere. He loves football," said the Frenchman. "He's very serious, very dedicated. The only thing

that could stop him from having the career he can make is injuries. "He had the history of his injuries. It's been bad recently. But I hope he can get rid of that and make the career he deserves."

Wenger revealed that midfielders Aaron Ramsey and Mathieu Flamini are in contention for the trip to West Ham after thigh and hamstring injuries respectively. He also confirmed that the club are in talks over a new contract for 19-year-old Nigerian forward Alex Iwobi, who has scored two goals in his last two appearances. — AFP



LEICESTER: Leicester City's English striker Jamie Vardy controls the ball during the English Premier League football match between Leicester City and Southampton at King Power Stadium. — AFP

LEICESTER WITHIN FOUR WINS OF FAIRYTALE END

LONDON: When Leicester City faced Sunderland on the opening day of the season, even their most optimistic fans were expecting another testing struggle to avoid relegation. As they prepare to visit Sam Allardyce's side in the return fixture on Sunday, some of those supporters are now pre-emptively buying scarves emblazoned with the words 'Premier League Champions'.

While many are no doubt steering clear to avoid tempting fate, four victories from the remaining six games of the season will hand Leicester a maiden top flight title and complete one of the most remarkable fairytales in English soccer history. Leicester lead second place Tottenham Hotspur by seven points heading into Sunday's game and need 12 more to put themselves out of sight. For the Leicester side that plunged to the foot of the table last season, four wins in six games might have seemed like a daunting task.

Yet such has been the collective sense of calm that seems to encircle Claudio Ranieri's

side this year that few are now expecting a collapse in the home straight. The slip-ups and the wobbles have been reserved for the so-called bigger teams, who have all fallen off the pace while Leicester have sailed smoothly through the supposed choppy waters of the title run-in.

Four successive 1-0 victories have propelled Leicester to the verge of success and been testament to the organizational abilities of their Italian coach. Leicester have never kept five consecutive clean sheets in the top flight, but, in a season when past records have counted for little, it would be a brave man, or perhaps a foolish one, to bet against another shut-out against Sunderland, whose relegation woes are intensifying.

Now-or-never

Allardyce's side are four points adrift of Norwich City in 17th and entering the now-or-never part of the season when they will have to start winning or become resigned to their fate. Tottenham, whose hopes of catching Leicester were dented by their 1-1

draw with Liverpool at Anfield last weekend, could find themselves 10 points adrift of the leaders by the time they host Manchester United later on Sunday.

United are involved in a local battle with Manchester City for fourth place and the final Champions League qualification spot and would love nothing more than to salvage an inconsistent season by overhauling their rivals in the table. City, buoyed by a gritty 2-2 draw at Paris St Germain in their Champions League quarter-final first leg on Wednesday, host West Bromwich Albion, who are comfortably placed in mid-table.

Third place Arsenal, whose hopes of taking anything from the campaign look forlorn as they trail Leicester by 11 points, albeit with a game in hand, travel to West Ham United tomorrow. Newcastle United, who are battling local rivals Sunderland to avoid relegation, visit Southampton, while Norwich play at Crystal Palace. Alan Pardew's Palace are three points above Norwich, but seemingly in freefall after failing to win a league game since December. — Reuters

SWISS POLICE SEARCH UEFA OFFICES IN PANAMA FALLOUT

GENEVA: Swiss authorities raided the headquarters of European football, Iceland named a new prime minister and the world's largest drugs company merger fell apart on Wednesday, as the fallout from the Panama Papers scandal gathered pace.

Police searched UEFA's Geneva offices as part of a probe into a Champions League television rights deal signed by Gianni Infantino before he became the president of world football's governing body. Piling pressure on FIFA, already reeling from a vast bribery scandal, Uruguayan Juan Pedro Damiani resigned as an ethics judge after he was linked in the papers to another disgraced football official wanted in the United States.

In Iceland, authorities called elections in the autumn and appointed agriculture minister Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson as premier after his predecessor was forced out over allegations he hid millions of dollars of investments in the country's banks.

Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson was the first political scalp of what is thought to be the biggest ever leak of inside information in history, after a worldwide media probe into 11.5 million inside documents from a Panama law firm. The year-long investigation, published on Sunday, revealed the hidden offshore assets of some 140 political figures, including 12 current or former heads of state, as well as celebrities, sports stars and dozens of billionaires. The revelations from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) have shone a light on the murky world of offshore tax dealings which, though legal, can be used to hide assets, launder the proceeds of crime or conceal politically inconvenient wealth.

People close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping's relatives, Argentine footballing great Lionel Messi and film star Jackie Chan have all been named as owning offshore accounts with Mossack Fonseca. But the Panama law firm also counted criminals among its clients, including "drug traffickers from Mexico, Guatemala and Eastern Europe" and people and companies under US and European sanctions, said Sueddeutsche Zeitung, the German newspaper that obtained the documents.

In the first taste of how the revelations could reshape the world of business, Pfizer said a \$160 billion merger with Allergan to create the world's largest pharmaceuticals company would not go ahead after Washington moved to tighten taxation rules.

Panama under fire

Countries around the world have been piling pressure on Panama to reform its financial sector, which has been trying to head off a feared international clampdown on its offshore business. France has added Panama to its "grey" list of world tax havens, and Finance Minister Michel Sapin on Wednesday called on the OECD group of wealthy nations to do the same.

"Unfortunately Panama has a bit of a tendency to make U-turns, to play the good guy and then the bad guy. This cannot go on," Sapin told French radio on Wednesday. Panama hit back, however, after days of being hammered in the world's media.

President Juan Carlos Varela on Wednesday called on OECD countries "to return to the table for dialogue and seek agreements, and to not use these events to affect Panama's image". Alvaro Aleman, minister for the presidency, warned France of "a law that sets out retaliation measures against countries that include Panama in 'grey lists'". One of Mossack Fonseca's founders, Ramon Fonseca, told AFP it had lodged a criminal complaint with Panamanian prosecutors over the data breach, which he blamed on a computer hack launched from abroad. — AFP