

KARIM MAKES REAL CLICK SAYS ZIDANE

MADRID: Real Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane hailed the impact of Karim Benzema after his compatriot lifted the European champions from the early blow of conceding to beat Napoli 3-1 on Wednesday. Madrid are now on the brink of a seventh successive Champions League quarter-final as they aim to become the first team to retain the trophy in the Champions League era.

Lorenzo Insigne's wonder strike from 40 yards after just eight minutes had given Napoli a shock lead at the Bernabeu. However, Zidane was rewarded for keeping faith in Benzema despite fierce criticism of late from the Spanish press as he headed home his 51st Champions League goal to equalise before second-half strikes from Toni Kroos and Casemiro gave Madrid a commanding lead.

"I am always happy with him, said Zidane. "He needed that goal which lately he didn't get, but I am happy not only for the goal but also for how he played generally. He made the rest of the team play better and his movement is very good. "The performances of Karim, Cristiano (Ronaldo), James (Rodriguez) they all made the rest of the team better."

Benzema's goal also moved him ahead of compatriot Thierry Henry as top French scorer of all-time in the Champions League proper. "It was a great night. We all played well, not just me," Benzema told Spanish TV station MEGA. "I am very happy and proud of my work. There are a lot of sacrifices, but now I feel good. "I scored a goal and saw that the fans were with me which is very good for my confidence."

NAPOLI RUE MISSED CHANCES

Napoli had chances to set up a mouthwatering second leg on March 7 as Dries Mertens blazed over with the goal at his mercy and former Madrid winger Jose Maria Callejon had a goal ruled out for offside late on. However, Napoli boss Maurizio Sarri believes his side still have a chance of reaching the quarter-finals for the first time in their history.

"Clearly Madrid played their best game of the past three months and we didn't play our best," said Sarri. "If we manage to play at our best we are not that far away. We may lose (in the second leg) but we can go for it." "It is the first game we have lost in four

months. We didn't manage to express ourselves 100 percent, but we can't lose our confidence because we have the return game and league games to come.

"We don't have a great chance of turning it around but we have a chance." Even a pre-match pep talk from former Napoli great Diego Maradona couldn't inspire the Italians to victory. However, Sarri believes their fast start more than justified his decision to invite the Argentine into the dressing room before kick-off. "Diego spoke with us for 30 seconds, but he is a legend so clearly it had an impact. Our first 10-15 minutes were our best."

Despite that early blow, though, Madrid responded like European champions to take control and Sarri lamented his side's distribution from the back under Real's intense pressing. "It was difficult to mount counter-attacks because we gave the ball away so much," he added. "We were playing a very good team, the best team in the world. The only thing is I feel we committed more errors than normal. "It is normal to suffer in this stadium, it is normal to commit errors, but thanks to these type of games you improve." — AFP

SOCCER

FIFA UNWORRIED ABOUT RUSSIA 2018 HOOLIGANS

DOHA: FIFA president Gianni Infantino said yesterday he was not worried about hooliganism at next year's Russia World Cup, amid growing fears the tournament could be blighted by fan violence. Speaking in Qatar following a FIFA executive summit meeting, Infantino also said that football's governing body has not asked Russian Deputy Prime Minister Vitaly Mutko to resign as the tournament's chief organiser.

"I am not concerned about trouble and violence in 2018," Infantino told AFP and a small group of reporters on the sidelines of the meeting. "I have full confidence in the Russian authorities, they are taking this matter very, very seriously." He added that Russian organizers had been in touch with FIFA, UEFA and the organisers of Euro 2016 in France, where Russian and English fans clashed in bloody street battles, especially in Marseille, leading to the expulsion of several Russians. He added that Russia was a "welcoming country, which wants to celebrate football". Infantino's comments came ahead of the broadcast of a television documentary in Britain on Thursday in which Russian hardline fans are said to threaten trouble against English fans who go to the World Cup.

Hardline hooligans warned that the 2018 World Cup would be a "festival of violence". There are also concerns about Mutko, who has faced questions about his role as head of the Russia's 2018 organizing committee after being linked to doping by Russian athletes. Mutko has denied any link to the scandal, which a report by a World Anti-Doping Agency investigator said was "state sponsored". Mutko is also seeking a new place on the FIFA council in a vote in April and must pass an integrity check. Asked whether he has asked Mutko to resign as head of the Russian World Cup committee, Infantino said: "No."



DOHA: FIFA President Gianni Infantino speaks to reporters at a press conference during the FIFA Executive Football Summit in the Qatari capital. — AFP

FOUR WC HOST COUNTRIES?

Infantino was however more open about the prospect of countries sharing the hosting of the World Cup finals from 2026 on, when the tournament will expand to 48 teams. "For 2026, now we are starting the bidding process, we took already some important decisions," he said. "We will encourage co-hosting of the World Cup.

"We need FIFA to show we are reasonable and we have to think about sustainability long-term. "If you think about the World Cup and the requirements we are putting on countries there are really only a few countries in the world that can comply. "It is perfectly in line with our sustainability and legacy to maybe bring together two, three, four countries who can jointly present a project with three, four, five stadiums each."

He added that hosting countries should "preferably" be located close to one other, which may increase speculation about a joint North American bid for 2026. One of the few countries which can afford a World Cup on its own is Qatar. Last week, the country's finance minister, Ali Shareef Al-Emadi, said the energy-rich 2022 hosts were spending almost \$500 million every week on major infrastructure projects for football's biggest tournament. However one outstanding concern is the need for Qatar to test its multi-billion dollar facilities ahead of 2022. Asked if Doha could host the 2021 FIFA World Club World Cup tournament, Infantino said "all options were open". "We have to make sure there will be some test events, test matches organized here and all the options are open at this moment in time." — AFP

FIFA: NO EVIDENCE OF BRAIN INJURY RISK

ZURICH: FIFA insisted yesterday there is no conclusive proof that heading a ball causes an increased risk of brain disease, after the release of a study on footballers who died from dementia. "To our very best knowledge, there is currently no true evidence of the negative effect of heading or other sub-concussive blows," football's world body said in response to calls by British neurological experts for greater research.

"Results from studies on active and former professional football players in relation to brain function are inconclusive," a spokesman said in a statement. The spokesman acknowledged that professional players are "more exposed to all football activities including heading from early childhood than recreational players." But FIFA said: "Fortunately, football (soccer) does not belong to the high-risk sports for brain and head injuries."

A British study said professional footballers are at heightened risk of developing a brain disease that can cause dementia and is usually found in boxers and American football players. The study, published in the *Acta Neuropathologica* journal, looked at 14 retired footballers with dementia who started playing football and heading the ball in childhood or early teens.

Post-mortem exams on six of the players found that four showed signs of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), far in excess of the average rate of 12 percent found in the general population. It is the first time CTE has been confirmed in a study involving ex-football players. "The findings of our study show a potential link between playing football and CTE," lead researcher Helen Ling, from University College London's Institute of Neurology, told AFP.

"Large-scale study is needed and cooperation from professional bodies such as the FA (Football Association) and FIFA will be required," she said. All of the ex-players involved had been referred to a psychiatry service in Swansea, Wales between 1980 and 2010. Twelve of the 14 died with advanced dementia. FIFA said that it has been "actively following the issue of head and brain injuries" for more than 15 years including publishing scientific studies with international sports federations and research groups.

It said rule changes toughening sanctions for elbow to the head blows and introducing a head injury protocol in 2014 had cut head injury numbers. FIFA quoted one international study on children aged seven to 12 years which indicated there was "one concussion with ball contact every 200,000 playing hours." "FIFA will continue to monitor the situation of head injuries, maintaining constant contact with current and on-going studies regarding long-term neurocognitive changes, both in male and female football players," the spokesman said declaring the health of players to be "a top priority in developing the game." — AFP