

Barcelona, Real draw as Clasico marred by violence

BARCELONA: Barcelona and Real Madrid could not be separated on Wednesday in a Clasico that was overshadowed by violent clashes between Catalan independence protestors and police outside Camp Nou.

After being postponed in October, there were renewed fears of unrest around Spain's most famous fixture and while the match was only briefly interrupted by yellow beach balls thrown onto the pitch, outside the stadium, chaos ensued. Masked protestors had set bins on fire and thrown rocks and glass bottles at police, who responded by firing foam bullets. Forty-six people were lightly injured in the clashes, including eight who needed to be taken to a medical centre for extra care, local emergency services said.

Five people were arrested, according to a police spokesman. The protestors, many of them carrying Catalan separatist flags, began setting up barricades in the middle of the street which they then burned, after police arrived in dozens of police vans. Inside the stadium, the match passed largely undisturbed, save for a brief pause early in the second half as dozens of yellow beach balls had to be removed by stewards. "There was tension in the game and I noticed when some yellow balls fell down," said Barcelona coach Ernesto Valverde.

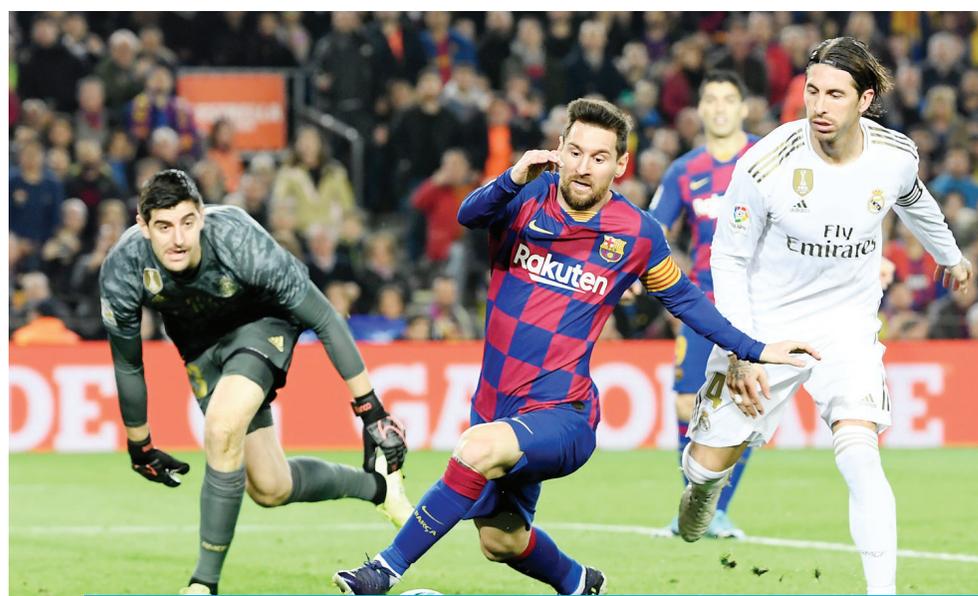
"But nothing more. We tried to give a sense of normality." "Everyone wanted to see a good football match," said Real coach Zinedine Zidane. "In that sense I think we can be happy." The game was less eventful than expected, with nei-

ther Barcelona nor Real ever really at their best and both, perhaps in the end, happier not to win than to lose.

A goalless draw means Barcelona stay top of La Liga, ahead of Real on goal difference while the historic score in league meetings between the two rivals remains 72 victories apiece. "More than a Clasico", read the frontpage of Barcelona daily Mundo Deportivo on Wednesday morning ahead of a fixture that while always politically charged, had assumed even greater significance than usual.

The game was originally due to be played on October 26 but was postponed due to violent protests breaking out across Catalonia, following the sentencing of nine independence leaders to prison. In the 53 days since, expectations swelled around what Democratic Tsunami, the Catalan independence protest group, might do to disrupt the most watched club football match in the world. But in truth, there was less than expected during the 90 minutes. Early in the second half, yellow beachballs were thrown onto the field while blue banners bearing the slogan of Democratic Tsunami: 'Spain, sit and talk', were also held up.

Four hours before kick-off, thousands had gathered at all four corners of the stadium to hold the same blue banners and wave Catalan flags, while some blocked traffic too. But the demonstrations were peaceful, in stark contrast to the ugly scenes that would come a few hours later. Both teams had departed from the same



BARCELONA: Real Madrid's Spanish defender Sergio Ramos (R) challenges Barcelona's Argentine forward Lionel Messi (C) next to Real Madrid's Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois during the "El Clasico" Spanish League football match between Barcelona FC and Real Madrid CF. —AFP

hotel and aside from whistles and insults directed at the Madrid team bus, each arrived without incident. Club president Florentino Perez gave a thumbs up as he walked in.

Gareth Bale was last to get off, by which time he might have known he was starting for the first

time in four matches. Ramos played in his 43rd Clasico, a record for any player in history. For Barcelona, Sergio Busquets was included in the line-up first announced before he was swapped out for Ivan Rakitic. Barca claimed it had been a communication error. —AFP

Firmino takes Reds into Club World Cup final

DOHA: Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp is looking forward to a "really tough game" in the Club World Cup final against Flamengo after Roberto Firmino's injury-time goal gave the Anfield side a hard-fought 2-1 win over Monterrey of Mexico on Wednesday.

Firmino came off the bench to turn in a cross from fellow substitute Trent Alexander-Arnold in the 91st minute at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha after Naby Keita's early opener for a weakened Liverpool side had swiftly been cancelled out by Argentine striker Rogelio Funes Mori. Having taken time out from their seemingly relentless march towards the Premier League title to travel to Qatar, Liverpool will be relieved at coming through this test, and they remain on course to win this competition for the first time. However, they must now beat a Flamengo side who have won the Copa Libertadores and the Brazilian title in the last month under Portuguese coach Jorge Jesus, and who will have had an extra day to prepare for the final after defeating Saudi club Al-Hilal 3-1 on Tuesday.

"Tough game, really tough game," said Klopp when asked about the prospect of facing Flamengo in what will be a repeat of the 1981 Intercontinental Cup final, when a Brazilian team captained by Zico beat Bob Paisley's European Cup holders 3-0 in Tokyo. "Flamengo's season is over, they are here with a full squad, but we just have to recover as

quickly as possible and then make ourselves ready." He will hope to have Virgil van Dijk back fit for the final after the inspirational Dutch centre-back sat out the Monterrey game due to illness, leaving skipper Jordan Henderson to partner Joe Gomez in defence.

"It was an easy decision because he couldn't train yesterday — he was on the pitch for a couple of minutes until the media left, and then unfortunately he had to leave as well," Klopp said about Van Dijk, who has played in every Premier League and Champions League game this season. "We will see how quick he can recover."

In addition, Klopp chose to leave Sadio Mane on the bench at kick-off along with Firmino and Alexander-Arnold, instead handing starts to the likes of Adam Lallana, Xherdan Shaqiri and Divock Origi.

"It was only possible the hard way," said Klopp of the way in which his side won, with Firmino's late goal coming after goalkeeper Alisson made a string of key saves to stop Monterrey from going in front.

"We had problems before the game, we knew we would have some problems in the game, but I really think the boys did exceptionally well."

At such a busy stage in the season, Klopp also admitted his relief when the winning goal went in, saying: "I was actually afraid of extra time to be honest so I was more than happy when Bobby scored that goal." —AFP

Teenage Zirkzee sparks Bayern's winning late show

BERLIN: Bayern Munich's Joshua Zirkzee scored on his Bundesliga debut, just two minutes after coming onto the pitch in his team's last-gasp 3-1 win away at SC Freiburg on Wednesday.

The 18-year-old Dutchman came on in the 90th minute before breaking a 1-1 deadlock, becoming the youngest player to score a goal this Bundesliga season. Bayern's Serge Gnabry added another in the final minute of injury time to put the result beyond doubt, crushing the hopes of a dogged and determined home side.

"When you score two goals with just minutes remaining to win the game, of course the bus ride home will have a different feel than if it had gone otherwise," said Bayern caretaker boss Hansi Flick.

It was business as usual early for Bayern, with Philippe Coutinho's chip over goalkeeper Mark Flekken cleared off the line after just two minutes.

In the 16th minute, 19-year-old Canadian Alphonso Davies put in a superb cross from the left wing, with Robert Lewandowski on the spot to open the scoring. It was Lewandowski's 19th league goal of the season — and the sixth time he opened the scoring for Munich this campaign.

The goal seemed to calm Bayern, with the Bavarians content to dominate possession without making too many incursions into the Freiburg end. After the half-time break, Freiburg showed the form that has taken them to sixth in the table, catching Bayern on the counter to create several half chances.

Vincenzo Grifo equalised in the 59th minute, nailing Janik Haberer's cross to give Bayern keeper Manuel Neuer no chance. Freiburg had several chances to take the lead as the clock ran down, with Bayern's players visibly shaken by the home team's relentless pressing.

The win sees Bayern go into third place, four points behind Leipzig and Borussia Mönchengladbach. Flick said he had faith in Zirkzee after some impressive showings on the training pitch.

"I simply thought that when another winger came on he could score — he is a striker and he shoots well, also in training. He's been with us (the main team) for three weeks and the development has been noteworthy," Flick said.

"There were two completely different halves. The first half we could've lead two or three to nil, but I must say that Freiburg in the second half played well." —AFP