

PLATINI GETS SOUTH AMERICAN SUPPORT AFTER FIFA BAN

ZURICH: UEFA chief Michel Platini was given powerful support from South America yesterday as he fought back against a 90-day ban imposed on him by FIFA as part of its corruption investigation.

The backing came from the South American confederation CONMEBOL which said that the 60-year-old Frenchman was innocent until proven guilty of any wrongdoing and that the ban was "untimely and disproportionate". Platini's lawyers had earlier launched an official appeal against the suspension at FIFA headquarters in Zurich.

The latest developments in the FIFA crisis came a day after FIFA president Sepp Blatter also appealed against a similar 90-day ban from all football-related activities over a Swiss criminal inquiry.

The bans on Blatter and Platini—the two most powerful men in world football—were announced by FIFA on Thursday as its ethics watchdog geared

up its investigation into fraud and corruption at the heart of the organisation.

The 60-year-old Platini, a frontrunner to succeed Blatter as chief of football's scandal-tainted world governing body, denies any wrongdoing in taking a \$2 million (1.8 million euros) payment from FIFA in 2011. The former France skipper has slammed the ban as "farfetched", insisting the payment was legitimate, and on Saturday a close associate said an official appeal had been lodged at FIFA's Zurich headquarters. The statement of support from CONMEBOL said that the South Americans did not agree with the FIFA ethics commission decision and that "the presumption of innocence is a fundamental right that has to be considered."

CONMEBOL added that it fully believed in Platini's capacity "to lead FIFA and the football world towards a brighter future."

Much now hangs on a crunch October 20 meeting of FIFA's ruling executive committee—announced late on

Friday following pressure from influential regional and national federations.

The fate of the election to replace Blatter—slated for February 26—could depend on the summit, with some senior FIFA figures suggesting the committee could debate postponing the vote.

Interim FIFA president Issa Hayatou, who Friday insisted ongoing health problems would not stop him doing the high-pressure job, is rushing from his native Cameroon to take the reins at FIFA HQ and is expected in Zurich on Tuesday.

The dramatic suspension of Blatter and Platini along with FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke was the latest blow to an organisation reeling from months of scandal.

The crisis has been building since May, when US authorities announced charges against 14 officials and sports marketing executives over bribery allegations amounting to more than \$150 million.

The suspensions handed out on

Thursday can be renewed for another 45 days when they run out in January, which would take the exclusion until just before the FIFA election.

Should either Blatter or Platini see their appeal rejected, they would still have the right to take their cases before the final-instance Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), based in Lausanne.

Adding to the controversy, Thursday's purge by the ethics committee also felled South Korean tycoon Chung Mong-Joon-like Platini a candidate to replace Blatter—who was banned from football activities for six years. Furious Chung has vowed to sue FIFA and take his case to CAS.

There was further drama on Friday as the ethics committee rejected Blatter's claims he was not allowed to give evidence before he was banned, saying he was given "all his rights".

There were reports the 79-year-old Blatter, head of FIFA since 1998, had complained that he only found out about his suspension after it was made

public. But ethics committee spokesman Andreas Bantel said Blatter had been given the chance to put his case on October 1. Platini also "had the very same rights" at an interview on the same day, Bantel said.

The former Juventus star had presented himself as the man to clean up FIFA but a cloud now hangs over his candidacy, though he insists he will press on with his bid for Blatter's hotseat.

He was named in a Swiss probe into Blatter for criminal mismanagement over the \$2 million payment which Platini says was payment for consulting work he undertook years earlier.

But his candidacy still needs to come under the microscope of FIFA's elections commission who will examine his suitability.

Blatter, who decided to quit in June just days after being reelected, has so far resisted calls from major sponsors including Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Visa for him to step down immediately.—AFP

CLUB FOOTBALL BECKONING FOR ITALIAN COACH CONTE

MILAN: Italy coach Antonio Conte has given a further indication he could return to club management after again brushing off questions concerning his future commitment to the Azzurri.

A win away to Group H rivals Azerbaijan later Saturday will see Italy book their place in the Euro 2016 finals and Italian football federation (FIGC) bosses are already keen for Conte to sign a contract extension until 2018.

But Conte looks increasingly unlikely to be at the Azzurri helm beyond next summer's showpiece in France amid reports he has his eye on taking over at Roma, AC Milan or Paris Saint Germain. "Right now is not the time to talk about my contract," Conte told reporters on Friday.

"The absolute priority is to qualify. The second priority after that is to play well at the European championships. I want to thank the (FIGC) president and his staff, who have always given me their support and they appreciate the passion and commitment that's required."

"There will be a time to talk about everything else later." FIGC president Carlo Tavecchio has said he is keen for Conte "to stay after the European championships, but we live in a democracy and everyone is free to decide what he wants to do. If he wants to stay, he will be welcome."

In terms of results, Conte's tenure has been fruitful. Italy remain unbeaten in 48 World Cup or Euro qualification matches—a statistic they will be hoping to stretch to 50

against Azerbaijan and then Norway on Tuesday. But Conte's position has always looked a fragile one and reports around Italy on Saturday supported pundits claims that the 46-year-old is desperate to return to the cut an thrust of club football.

According to Rome-based daily Il Messaggero, Conte could take over at Roma if their current coach Rudi Garcia, whose deal expires in 2018, does not win the league title this season. He has also been linked with AC Milan, and PSG, according to the report, have followed Conte closely.

Conte took over the Italy helm after Cesare Prandelli resigned in the wake of Italy's failure to get past the first round at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Having steered Juventus to three 'scudetto' titles in a record-setting three years with the Turin giants, the move into coaching the national team provided a stark contrast for Conte. He complained about his limited access to players, the lack of regular squad meetings and, after just one year into his contract, said: "I feel alone."

An initially tense relationship with the FIGC has since improved, but Conte seems destined to return to club management. In the meantime, Conte called for Italy to seal qualification ahead of their final qualifier at home to Norway on Tuesday by beating Azerbaijan. "We have to be intelligent and take the right approach to this game, because leaving it until the last game to qualify is dangerous," he said.—AFP



LONDON: England's Harry Kane (second from right) fails to score during the Euro 2016 Group E qualifying soccer match between England and Estonia at Wembley stadium. —AP

ENGLAND CRUISE PAST ESTONIA

LONDON: England, who reached Euro 2016 last month, comfortably beat Estonia 2-0 at Wembley on Friday to stay on course to complete a qualifying campaign with a 100 percent record for the first time. Goals from Theo Walcott after 45 minutes and Raheem Sterling in the 85th gave England their ninth successive win in a qualifying campaign for the first time.

England lead Group E with 27 points from nine games, with Switzerland also qualifying after beating San Marino 7-0 to climb to 18 points. Estonia have a remote mathematical chance of finishing third after Slovenia where held 1-1 by Lithuania.

England manager Roy Hodgson told ITV: "It was as tough as we thought it would be because we have played against an organised team that are also quite intelligent in the way they play."

"We attacked a lot and saw a lot of the ball and had quite a few chances but it was a question of putting them away. But I think we were good value for our 2-0 win. In these type of games if you are not careful and lose your concentration you can slip

up. "People are telling me that this victory tonight will ensure we are seeded for the tournament in France and that is important too."

England were never under any threat from an Estonia side that have only scored four goals in nine matches on a generally subdued night at Wembley. One of the high spots came before kickoff when Bobby Charlton presented fellow Manchester United great Wayne Rooney with a golden boot for breaking his 45-year-old scoring record with his 50th goal for England last month.

Rooney was out injured but England did not miss him. Ross Barkley created Walcott's opener before halftime with a superb through ball which the Arsenal man collected with a deft right foot touch before his shot gave keeper Mihkel Aksalu no chance.

Sterling doubled the lead five minutes before the end with an easy chance following a cross by substitute Jamie Vardy, who had only been on the pitch for two minutes.—Reuters

SWEDES SCRAPE PAST LIECHTENSTEIN

VADUZ: Sweden captain Zlatan Ibrahimovic struck his seventh goal in seven Euro 2016 qualifiers and missed a penalty as they beat a spirited Liechtenstein 2-0 in their Group G qualifier in Vaduz to claim at least a playoff spot on Friday. Russia won 2-1 in Moldova, leaving them second on 17 points, two ahead of Sweden and eight behind already-qualified leaders Austria who won 3-2 in Montenegro to end the hosts' interest.

Third-placed Sweden host Moldova on Monday when Russia welcome Montenegro needing a point to claim a spot at the finals in France because they have a better head-to-head record. It took Sweden 18 minutes to

get a shot on target but when it came it put them ahead, Marcus Berg holding off the challenge of Liechtenstein captain Mario Frick before slotting home.

Sweden's all-time leading scorer Ibrahimovic won a penalty five minutes before halftime but goalkeeper Peter Jehle flung himself to his right to save the striker's spot kick. Ibrahimovic made amends for that miss 10 minutes into the second half, latching on to Kim Kallstrom's long ball to rifle home his 58th international goal. Berg and Ibrahimovic then both missed good chances as the sluggish Swedes failed to make the most of their dominance.—Reuters



VADUZ: Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic (left) and Liechtenstein's Michele Polverino (right) challenge for the ball during the Euro 2016 qualifying Group G soccer match. —AP

Euro 2016 Qualifying Tables										
Group A										
Iceland	8	6	1	1	15	3	19			
Czech Republic	8	6	1	1	16	10	19	-	qualified	
Turkey	8	3	3	2	11	9	12			
Netherlands	8	3	1	4	13	10	10			
Latvia	8	0	4	4	4	16	4			
Kazakhstan	8	0	2	6	5	16	2			
Group B										
Wales	8	5	3	0	9	2	18			
Belgium	8	5	2	1	17	3	17			
Israel	8	4	1	3	14	9	13			
Bosnia-Herz	8	3	2	3	12	10	11			
Cyprus	8	3	0	5	12	13	9			
Andorra	8	0	0	8	3	30	0			
Group C										
Spain	9	8	0	1	22	3	24			
Ukraine	9	6	1	2	14	3	19			qualified
Slovakia	9	6	1	2	13	6	19			
Belarus	9	3	1	5	8	14	10			
Luxembourg	9	1	1	7	4	23	4			
Macedonia	9	1	0	8	6	18	3			
Group D										
Germany	9	6	1	2	22	8	19			
Poland	9	5	3	1	31	9	18			
R of Ireland	9	5	3	1	18	5	18			
Scotland	9	3	3	3	16	12	12			
Georgia	9	3	0	6	9	14	9			
Gibraltar	9	0	0	9	2	50	0			
Group E										
England	9	9	0	0	28	3	27			qualified
Switzerland	9	6	0	3	23	8	18			qualified
Slovenia	9	4	1	4	16	11	13			
Estonia	9	3	1	5	4	8	10			
Lithuania	9	3	1	5	7	15	10			
San Marino	9	0	1	8	1	34	1			
Group F										
N Ireland	9	6	2	1	15	7	20			qualified
Romania	9	4	5	0	8	2	17			
Hungary	9	4	4	1	8	5	16			
Finland	9	3	2	4	8	9	11			
Faroese	9	2	0	7	6	14	6			
Greece	9	0	3	6	3	11	3			
Group G										
Austria	9	8	1	0	19	5	25			qualified
Russia	9	5	2	2	19	5	17			
Sweden	9	4	3	2	13	9	15			
Montenegro	9	3	2	4	10	11	11			
Liechtenstein	9	1	2	6	2	23	5			
Moldova	9	0	2	7	4	14	2			
Group H										
Italy	8	5	3	0	11	5	18			
Norway	8	5	1	2	10	8	16			
Croatia	8	4	3	1	16	5	14			
Bulgaria	8	2	2	4	7	9	8			
Azerbaijan	8	1	3	4	6	13	6			
Malta	8	0	2	6	3	13	2			
- Croatia have had one point deducted										
Group I										
Portugal	7	6	0	1	9	4	18			qualified
Denmark	8	3	3	2	8	5	12			
Albania	7	3	2	2	7	5	11			
Serbia	7	2	1	4	7	11	4			
Armenia	7	0	2	5	5	11	2			
- Serbia have had three points deducted										
Note: Top two in each group as well as best third-placed team qualify for finals automatically. Eight other third-placed teams enter play-offs. France qualify as hosts.										



MOLDOVA: Moldova's Stefan Burghiu (left) fights for the ball with Russia's Aleksandr Kokorin (right) during the Euro 2016 Group G, qualifying match. —AP

RUSSIA WIN IN MOLDOVA

MOSCOW: Sergei Ignashevich celebrated becoming Russia's most capped player scoring in a hard-fought 2-1 victory over Moldova in Chisinau, which leaves Russia on course to qualify for Euro 2016.

The 36 year-old, who broke Viktor Onopko's appearance record by winning his 110th cap, opened the scoring from close range after 58 minutes, before Artem Dzyuba sealed victory with 12 minutes to go. Eugeniu Cebotaru scored for Moldova after 85 minutes but Russia held on for the vital win.

Russia went ahead when Dmitry Kombarov floated in a free kick from the right, which was chested down by Dzyuba straight into the path of Ignashevich and

the CSKA Moscow defender lashed the ball past Alexei Koshev.

Dzyuba doubled the lead in the 78th minute as he scored from close range following a corner to notch up his eighth goal in seven qualifying games.

Cebotaru made it a nervous finish for the visitors but they held on as head coach Leonid Slutskiy recorded his third straight victory since taking over from Fabio Capello.

Russia remain second in Group G on 17 points behind already qualified Austria and will qualify for next summer's European championships if they beat Montenegro in Moscow on Monday. Moldova stay bottom with two points.—Reuters