



France's forward Karim Benzema

FRENCH PM OPPOSES BENZEMA'S RETURN TO THE NATIONAL TEAM

PARIS: French Prime Minister Manuel Valls yesterday said Real Madrid star Karim Benzema should not be allowed to return to the France team while he remains at the centre of a sex-tape bribery inquiry. "I think that the conditions have not yet been met for Karim Benzema to come into the France team. He is still under investigation," Valls told French broadcaster RMC. Benzema, 28, is France's leading goalscorer, but has been excluded from national duty since he was placed under investigation over an attempt to bribe France teammate Mathieu Valbuena for a sex-tape. Benzema has been accused of complicity in the attempt.

"For young people, a great sportsman must be exemplary," the Prime Minister said, adding "(football) is our heritage, it's not something that just interests amateur sports fans, so we have to be careful, all acts and decisions have their importance". Valls, whose words echoed those of France's Sports Minister Patrick Kanner on Monday, added: "At the same time it is a decision for the French football federation and the coach." Benzema, whose hopes of playing at Euro 2016 had received a huge boost after his bail conditions were eased last week, later took to Twitter to express his frustration at Valls' comments.

"12 seasons that I'm professional: 541 matches played 0 red card 11 yellow cards !!! And some talk about me being exemplary???" Benzema tweeted. France coach Didier Deschamps has made no secret of his desire to see Benzema return to the national team set-up, after the striker was indefinitely suspended by the French Football Federation (FFF) in December. "On a sporting plan, I want to have the best players. You're not a striker at Real Madrid for five years with (Jose) Mourinho, (Carlo) Ancelotti, (Rafael) Benitez and (Zinedine)

Zidane for nothing. All the countries envy us," Deschamps told French daily L'Equipe recently.

'A great player'

Former France winger Franck Ribery backed Benzema's bid to return to play in the blue shirt. "Karim is a great player, he showed that at Real Madrid and with the France team," said Ribery during a Bayern Munich press conference. "I read that Didier Deschamps wants to take the best to the Euro and Karim certainly belongs to that group." On Friday, an appeals court upheld an investigating magistrate's decision to lift restrictions placed on Benzema that prevented him from coming into contract with Lyon midfielder Valbuena, who was the target of the blackmail attempt.

The FFF said the decision to lift the legal restrictions was "a first step," but added that it would wait to see how the investigation unfolded before deciding whether to recall Benzema. A final decision will be taken by FFF president Noel Le Graet. Meanwhile, publishing company Panini confirmed they have included Valbuena and not Benzema among the 20 France players present in their traditional sticker album for Euro 2016.

"At the time we made our choice, Karim Benzema was not selected," explained Panini France marketing manager Isabelle Fillon at Tuesday's launch. But Panini France president Alain Guerrini said the door remained open for his inclusion. "When we had to give up on including Benzema's picture that was a problem because he's a major player," Guerrini admitted. "If by chance Benzema is called up for France, it suits us perfectly. He's popular with young people and that would give us a marketing coup since there would be an update 'set,' with the possibility for advertising."—AFP

YOUNG AFGHAN BOXER PACKS A PUNCH AGAINST PATRIARCHY

KABUL: Nineteen-year-old Afghan boxer Sadaf Rahimi slams her punching bag deep in the bowels of Kabul's Ghazi stadium, dealing blows to gender stereotyping and doing her part to exorcise history: it was on these very grounds that the Taliban carried out public executions. Sadaf, whose shy gaze seems at odds with her muscular 60kg (130lb) frame, pulls on her gloves. A liberating spasm accompanies each blow that crushes the leather mitts of Agha Gul Alamyar, one of her trainers. Sadaf is a brilliant boxer. But she is also an exception in this conservative Muslim country where women participating in sport remains a taboo.

Her black pirate bandana serves not just to hold her hair in place, but to cover it. "I also wear a scarf in my everyday life because we live in a conservative country," she says. The Taliban's regime, known for its brutal treatment of women, was toppled in 2001 by a US-led military alliance. Since then, women's rights have improved, but a bitter patriarchal aftertaste remains for many Afghan women pressured to stay at

home to cook and raise children. At all of 19 years of age—seven of which she has spent in the ring—Sadaf sees a moral obligation "to prove that men and women can be equal. Girls are not forced to stay at home".

Going back in time

Born to a middle-class family from the Tajik ethnic group, Sadaf had to first make the case for boxing—which she discovered by watching Mike Tyson and Laila Ali on TV—to those closest to her. "At first my family was opposed to me boxing. They were saying: 'Why is a girl boxing? She should stay home, do the chores and cook.' My aunt is still against it," recalls the young woman, who is also pursuing a degree in economics. She is taking a stand on misogyny and against the darkest hours of Afghan history, by training inside Ghazi stadium which the Taliban used for their public executions during their 1996 to 2001 regime.

One of these executions was filmed in secret in 1999. The images show a woman, Zarmina, being executed by Kalashnikov fire for having killed her violent husband. "It's a pleasure to train her," says Agha Gul Alamyar, Sadaf's trainer. Like other young women, Sadaf has to contend with poor equipment and basic infrastructure. The mats are threadbare and the gloves and punching bags are old and worn out. "We lack everything, gloves, boots. There is no encouragement for the girls," he says. The federation currently counts only 20 women in its ranks.

Thirst for gold

In an effort to boost the sport among women, Sadaf wants to set up her own club and become a trainer. But first she must mount the podium in international competitions, a distant dream. She has already brought home three bronze medals in regional competitions, but isn't yet up to Olympic standard—the sport's Holy Grail. In 2012, Sadaf lied in order to accept an invitation by the Olympics organizer. But the International Boxing Association eventually did not allow her to leave for London, fearing her better trained opponents could seriously injure her. And this year, she won't be going to Rio. This time around the reasons are more prosaic—her defeat in the South Asian Games in India in mid-February means she won't be Olympics bound. "I am disappointed," she said. "In India I was completely alone. No trainer came with me, I had no support at all." —AFP



ITALY COACH CONTE TO QUIT, OPENING UP CHELSEA MOVE

ROME: Italy coach Antonio Conte, who has been linked to Chelsea, will give up his post after Euro 2016, the Italian Football Federation said yesterday. The 46-year-old former Juventus coach took over the national team in August 2014 and secured their qualification for the European Championship. Federation president Carlo Tavecchio told Italian media: "Antonio Conte has told me that at the end of the European championship, his job will end. He feels the need for the pitch, the everyday training, and this is something you can understand."

The news fueled speculation that Conte, who won three Serie A titles with Juventus, will be appointed manager of English Premier League side Chelsea following the tournament in France from June 10 to July 10. British and Italian media reports say that Chelsea have an accord with Conte, even adding that he will take his long term assistants Angelo Alessio and Massimo Carrera with him to London. Chelsea are having the worst season of Roman Abramovich's 13-year ownership. They sacked Jose Mourinho in December and interim boss Guus Hiddink had to take the team from just above the relegation zone to 10th place. Conte took over a demoralized Azzurri side following their humiliating first round exit from the World Cup in Brazil.

He confidently succeeded in his first task of qualifying for the European Championships. Italy advanced to the finals with ease by dominating their group which included Bulgaria, Norway, Croatia, Azerbaijan and Malta, with seven wins and three draws. Conte's Italy defense, with a Juventus core of Gianluigi Buffon, Leonardo Bonucci and Andrea Barzagli, proved solid, the coach has come under fire for his lacklustre forward line that managed just 16 goals in 10 qualifying games. Three months



BAKU: In this file photo, Italy's head coach Antonio Conte shouts instructions during the Euro 2016 soccer qualifying group H match between the Azerbaijan and Italy at the Olympic stadium in Baku, Azerbaijan. Antonio Conte will leave his post as Italy coach after this summer's European Championship. — AP

before the tournament gets underway, the team remains a work in progress.

In France, the Italians have been drawn in Group E along with Belgium, Sweden and the Republic of Ireland. Italy were beaten by world number one ranked team Belgium in a friendly last November, demonstrating the gap between Conte's side and the top European teams. Conte has also clashed with Italian football chiefs. He

had hoped to organize a training camp in February and wanted the Italian Cup final brought forward to allow international players involved to take holidays. Both requests were turned down to Conte's fury. Former Italy coaches Roberto Donadoni and Cesare Prandelli have both been named as possible replacements for Conte along with Claudio Ranieri, manager of surprise Premier League leaders Leicester. —AFP



NANJING: Elkeson (right) of Shanghai SIPG fights for the ball with a Gamba Osaka player during their AFC Champions League group stage football match in Shanghai yesterday. — AFP

ELKESON DOUBLE FIRES SHANGHAI TOP

SHANGHAI: Brazilian forward Elkeson's double strike fired Shanghai SIPG to the top of their AFC Champions League group with a 2-1 win over Gamba Osaka yesterday. Elkeson, off-loaded by reigning Asian champions Guangzhou Evergrande in January, looked an increasingly important signing as he sealed SIPG's second win in Group G. It was enough for Sven-Goran Eriksson's side to leapfrog Melbourne Victory, who were held 0-0 by South Korea's Suwon Samsung Bluewings in a combative contest earlier.

Elkeson put SIPG ahead with a finish from close range on 41 minutes as the home side dominated. And after his Brazilian opposite number Patric nodded Gamba level on the hour-mark, Elkeson popped up again with the match-winning strike just two minutes later. The decisive goal may have made uncomfortable viewing for Evergrande fans as it came from a cross by Dario Conca, Elkeson's former team-mate at the Asian and Chinese title-holders.

Meanwhile big-spending Chinese team Jiangsu Suning's unconvincing campaign remained stuck in second gear with a 0-0 draw away to FC Tokyo. Asia's record signing Alex Teixeira failed to inspire the visitors, who were missing ex-Chelsea midfielder Ramires following a red card in their previous outing. Instead it was FC Tokyo who looked likelier to win, with goalkeeper Zhang Sipeng forced into a reaction save in the second half and Hiroki Kawano seeing a deflected header drop just wide.

The draw left Jiangsu second in Group E behind 2006 champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, who beat bottom-placed Vietnamese outfit Binh Duong 2-0. In Melbourne, A-League champions Victory were frustrated by a disciplined Suwon defense, although the goalless draw meant they remained unbeaten

in their three games so far. Chances were at a premium with Kwak Hee-Ju man-marking leading Victory scorer Besart Berisha so closely that he didn't have any shots at goal in the 90 minutes. "They are a very difficult team to break down, they're so disciplined," Victory coach Kevin Muscat said.

"When you're that disciplined and you've got a work ethic like Suwon have then they

are difficult to break down but we did create some decent chances, particularly in the first half." Victory veteran Archie Thompson had the ball in the back of the net in the 53rd minute after heading in from a corner, but was ruled offside. Singapore referee Muhammad Taqi brandished the yellow card six times in a physical contest but also let the game flow.—AFP

PALESTINIAN CHILD SURVIVOR TO MEET REAL MADRID STARS

RAMALLAH: A Palestinian boy who survived a firebombing by Jewish extremists that killed his parents and brother will travel to meet Real Madrid stars including his idol Cristiano Ronaldo. Five-year-old Ahmed Dawabsha, his uncle and his grandparents were to fly from the Jordanian capital Amman to Spain, his grandfather said.

"We have been invited by Real Madrid, but we don't know yet which day we will be able to meet the players," Hussein Dawabsha said. Palestinian Football Association head Jibril Rajoub welcomed the "superb humanitarian gesture by Real Madrid, its administration and Cristiano Ronaldo, who are restoring hope for a child who lost his entire family." "There is an unknown soldier in this initiative and that is Zinedine Zidane, who we warmly thank," he said of the Real Madrid coach.

The July 31 attack on the Dawabsha family home in the village of Duma in the occupied West Bank killed 18-month-old Ali Saad Dawabsha and fatally wounded his parents. Ahmed, who was hospitalized after

the attack with severe burns, was the sole survivor from the immediate family. "He has just spent eight months in hospital," his grandfather said. "He is doing better, but a lot of time and care is still needed for him to truly recover." The attack drew renewed attention to Jewish extremism and accusations Israel had not done enough to prevent such violence. It also sparked international condemnation and worsened tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. Palestinians moved by images of the bandaged boy wearing a Real Madrid jersey campaigned for months on social media to convince the team to meet Ahmed. The team signaled in January that it would be able to organize such a meeting. Ronaldo's rival Lionel Messi was similarly moved by the plight of another five-year-old boy. The Afghan boy won the Internet's heart when he was pictured wearing a plastic bag as an improvised Messi jersey. Murtaza Ahmadi later travelled with his family to Kabul to receive two jerseys autographed by the Barcelona star and presented to the young fan by UNICEF.—AFP