

UFC RETURN TO ASIA COULD SPARK TURF WAR WITH REGIONAL PROMOTIONS

HONG KONG: The world's largest mixed martial arts organisation is looking to knuckle its way into Asia amid warnings the move could spark a brawl with regional promotions over a slice of the lucrative market.

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which has made cage fighters such as Conor McGregor and Ronda Rousey into household names, earlier this year announced five events begin-

ning with a card in Singapore on June 17 after a 19-month hiatus from Asia.

The Las Vegas-based UFC's return to Asia represents the organisation's latest crack at expanding its foothold in the birthplace of martial arts. UFC have held shows in Asia from Tokyo to Manila but analysts say the efforts have yielded mixed returns on their investment compared to record-breaking triumphs in North America.

"Dana White (the UFC president) has come out here before and that's kind of his style to come out and say amazing things: 'We're so focused on Asia. China's going to be our next big things for us,'" Matt Eaton, editor of the Hong Kong-based Rough Magazine, told AFP. "But it never really played out."

The UFC made a concerted push to enter the Chinese market throughout 2014.

They held two shows in the southern Chinese city of Macau and produced a season of its signature reality TV series "The Ultimate Fighter" that aired in the mainland featuring Chinese contenders battling for a UFC contract.

But less than a year after the show hit the airwaves the company shuttered its Beijing office and relocated operations to Singapore. "They have not penetrated the market in Asia as they think they

may have thought they would five, six, seven years ago," said Marc Raimondi, assistant editor at MMAFighting.com.

During a press conference in Singapore in February the UFC's top brass promised their sights were firmly fixed on Asia. "We're aware of the need for an Asian champion as we've never had one, said Joe Carr, UFC Head of International and Content. "That's really the last piece of the puzzle for us."—AFP

SOCCER

POLICE HUNT SUSPECT OF DORTMUND BUS BLAST

DORTMUND: German investigators were hunting yesterday for possible suspects responsible for three explosions that rocked the Borussia Dortmund football team's bus, injuring a player and a policeman. The assault, described by Dortmund city's police chief as a "targeted attack" against the team, shook German football ahead of crucial Champions League ties.

Investigations will focus on a letter claiming responsibility for the attack that was found close to the site of the blasts. "The letter claims responsibility for what happened," prosecutor Sandra Luecke said late Tuesday, telling journalists that "its authenticity is being verified."

German authorities have held off from describing it as a terror attack, saying it is too early to determine a motive.

But Germany has been on high alert since a series of jihadist attacks last year, including the Christmas market truck assault in Berlin in December that killed 12 people. The explosives detonated minutes after the Dortmund team bus pulled away from the squad's hotel and headed for their quarter-final, first-leg, tie against Monaco.

Spanish international Marc Bartra underwent surgery on a broken wrist after he was hit by flying glass. The injured policeman, who was on a motorcycle and had been escorting the team bus, suffered trauma from the noise of the blasts. Dortmund's quarter-final match will now be played on Wednesday evening, just hours before another Champions League clash in Germany between Bayern Munich and Real Madrid.

"We are assuming that they were a targeted attack against the Dortmund team," said the western German city's police chief Gregor Lange, adding however that it did not amount to an organised terror assault.

SHOCKED PLAYERS

The bus had set off for the Borussia stadium about 10 kilometres (six miles) away when "three explosive charges detonated" police said. The explosives, which went off shortly after 7:00 pm (1700 GMT), were hidden in a hedge and were detonated as the bus passed. The blast shattered the bus windows and the vehicle was burned on the right hand side.

"The bus turned onto the main road, when there was a huge noise—a big explo-

sion," Dortmund's Swiss goalkeeper Roman Burki told Swiss media. "After the bang, we all crouched down in the bus. Anyone who could, threw himself on the floor."

"We did not know if more would come."

Burki said Bartra was "hit by splinters of broken glass". Dortmund's press spokesman said the 26-year-old had broken the radius bone in his right wrist. The club said other players were safe and there was no danger inside the Signal Iduna Park stadium. "The whole team is in a state of shock, you can't get pictures like that out of your head," Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke said. "I hope the team will be in a position to be able to compete tomorrow on the pitch." In a crisis situation like this, Borussia pulls together.

'HARD TO ABSORB'

Germany's best-selling Bild daily quoted anonymous sources saying that investigators were hunting for a likely getaway car used by the attacker. The vehicle had foreign car plates, said the newspaper, which also added that police believed the explosives were a particular type of pipe-bomb. The announcement that the game was postponed was only made to the stunned stadium about 15 minutes before Tuesday's match was due to start. Dortmund's president Reinhard Rauball said he believed the team would be ready for Wednesday's game. "The players will be able to push this out of their minds and be in a position to put in their usual performances," he said.

"The worst thing would be if whoever committed this attack was now able to get to affect them through it."

But ex-Dortmund player Steffen Freund, who won the Champions League with Borussia in 1997, said there would be scars.

"When there has been a direct attack on the team bus, then it's not just forgotten by Wednesday," said the 47-year-old. "Mentally and psychologically that is hard to absorb, it's a lot to deal with."

Dortmund police said security would be tightened at Wednesday's match, with a major deployment of officers to "ensure that the game is played safely". Separately, security was also being tightened at the Bayern-Real tie in Munich.

Bild said both teams' hotels were under heavy police guard, and the squads' buses driven to a safe location. — AFP



ATLANTA: Charlotte Hornets guard Treveon Graham (12) and Atlanta Hawks forward Paul Millsap (4) vie for a loose ball during the first half of an NBA basketball game, Tuesday, in Atlanta. — AFP

BASKETBALL

HAWKS STING HORNETS, SET PLAYOFF DATE WITH WIZARDS

ATLANTA: Dwight Howard had 19 points and 12 rebounds as the resurgent Atlanta Hawks won their fourth straight game, routing the listless Charlotte Hornets 103-76 on Tuesday night to wrap up the No. 5 seed in the Eastern Conference. The Hawks will face the Washington Wizards in the opening round of the playoffs. A week ago, Atlanta's playoff hopes were in jeopardy after a dismal stretch that included two losses to Brooklyn, the worst team in the NBA. Then, in a sudden turnaround that epitomized the team's maddening inconsistency this season, the Hawks knocked off East-leading Boston and recorded two straight stunning victories over the defending NBA champion Cleveland Cavaliers, including Sunday's comeback from a 26-point deficit. This one was never in doubt. Charlotte played its regular-season finale already eliminated from the playoffs and without its best player, Kemba Walker.

NUGGETS 109, MAVERICKS 91

Gary Harris scored 20 points and Denver beat Dallas with the Mavericks honoring retiring Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo as a ceremonial player. With nothing at stake in a lost season that will be the worst for Dallas (32-49) since going 20-62 in 1997-98, the Mavericks followed through with an idea hatched in part by star Dirk Nowitzki weeks ago when it was clear Romo wasn't returning to the Cowboys. Romo was honored exactly a week after announcing he was leaving football to become the No. 1 NFL analyst at CBS. The soon-to-be-37-year-old had the crowd on its feet in the final minute hoping he could play, but Romo wasn't on the roster or under contract. After breaking a bone in his back last preseason, the career passing leader for the storied Cowboys franchise lost the starting job he held for 10 years to rookie Dak Prescott and decided not to play for another team. Mason Plumlee and Malik Beasley scored 16 apiece in the first game for the Nuggets (39-42) since getting eliminated from the postseason. Nowitzki scored 21 for Dallas.

THUNDER 100, TIMBERWOLVES 98

Victor Oladipo scored 20 points and hit a jumper with 6.3 seconds to play to lift Russell Westbrook-less Oklahoma City over Minnesota. With Westbrook resting for the first time this season, Oladipo also had nine rebounds and six assists, and the Thunder outrebounded Minnesota 54-35. Starters Taj Gibson and Andre Roberson also sat out as the Thunder prepare for a first-round series against Houston. Domantas Sabonis added 19 points and nine rebounds. Karl-Anthony Towns had 26 points and 12 rebounds, while Andrew Wiggins overcame a 1-for-11 start to finish with 18 points for the Minnesota. But the Timberwolves again struggled to get stops down the stretch and Wiggins missed a 3-pointer at the buzzer as they lost their fifth straight game.

LAKERS 108, PELICANS 96

Metta World Peace scored a team-leading 18 points during what might have been his final home game for the Lakers, and Los Angeles

NBA results/standings									
Eastern Conference					Western Conference				
Atlantic Division					Northwest Division				
W	L	PCT	GB	Utah	50	31	.617	-	
Boston	52	29	.642	-	Oklahoma City	47	34	.580	3
Toronto	50	31	.617	2	Portland	41	40	.506	9
NY Knicks	30	51	.370	22	Denver	39	42	.481	11
Philadelphia	28	53	.346	24	Minnesota	31	50	.383	19
Brooklyn	20	61	.247	32	Pacific Division				
Central Division					Golden State	66	15	.815	-
Cleveland	51	30	.630	-	LA Clippers	50	31	.617	16
Milwaukee	42	39	.519	9	Sacramento	32	49	.395	34
Indiana	41	40	.506	10	LA Lakers	26	55	.321	40
Chicago	40	41	.494	11	Phoenix	24	58	.293	42.5
Detroit	37	44	.457	14	Southwest Division				
Southeast Division					San Antonio	61	20	.753	-
Washington	49	32	.605	-	Houston	54	27	.667	7
Atlanta	43	38	.531	6	Memphis	43	38	.531	18
Miami	40	41	.494	9	New Orleans	33	48	.407	28
Charlotte	36	46	.439	13.5	Dallas	32	49	.395	29
Orlando	28	53	.346	21					

extended its late-season winning streak to five games with a victory over New Orleans.

World Peace made his 840th career NBA start and hit four 3-pointers while scoring all of his points in the second half, thrilling his younger teammates and setting off chants of his name from the Staples Center crowd. Although he hasn't announced his retirement, the 37-year-old veteran of 17 NBA seasons got several standing ovations down the stretch. Cheick Diallo scored 19 points for the Pelicans, who lost their fifth straight while playing without big men Anthony Davis and DeMarcus Cousins.

KINGS 129, SUNS 104
Buddy Hield scored a career-high 30 points

and Ty Lawson had his first career triple-double, getting 22 points, 12 assists and 11 rebounds as Sacramento beat Phoenix. The Kings never trailed, scoring the game's first nine points, leading by 19 at halftime and keeping a double-digit lead the entire second half. Ben McLemore, Willie Cauley-Stein and Georgios Papagiannis all had 13 points for the Kings. Skal Labissiere and Anthony Tolliver had 12 points apiece. The Kings snapped a two-game losing streak, beating the Suns for the third time in four games this season. Tyler Ulis had 27 points and Marquese Chriss scored 22 for Phoenix. Leading scorer Devin Booker was given the night off as the Suns finished 24-58. — AP

BRISBANE UPSET KASHIMA, SUWON TAKE POLE POSITION

BRISBANE: Australia's Brisbane Roar kept their Asian Champions League hopes flickering with a 2-1 win over Japanese champions Kashima Antlers in Brisbane yesterday.

Goals from striker Jamie Maclaren and midfielder Brett Holman gave Brisbane a 2-0 lead before Kashima pulled a goal back near the end. It was Brisbane's first win of the campaign and took their points tally to four, just two behind Group E leaders Kashima. "That's a huge win for us," Roar's Danish midfielder Thomas Kristensen said.

"I saw them on television not long ago playing against Real Madrid and they probably should have won that game, so we know it was a quality squad. But we also believe in our team and we have some good players, so we deserved to win."

Maclaren lashed home with his left foot after a defensive error from Naomichi Ueda to

put the Roar ahead after 18 minutes.

It was Brisbane's first goal in four ACL group games this season. Former Soccerroo Holman doubled Brisbane's lead four minutes after the resumption, with an instinctive shot off a set-piece. Kashima pulled one back 11 minutes from the end when substitute Ryota Nagaki blasted home as the Roar defence failed to clear their lines. It was only Brisbane's third win in 16 games in the AFC Champions League and it gave them renewed hope of qualifying for the knockout rounds if they can get a result against Muangthong United in Thailand in two weeks' time.

Kashima face Ulsan Hyundai Motors in South Korea in their next match. In Group G, Suwon Bluewings of South Korea took pole position to qualify as they all but eliminated Hong Kong side Eastern with a 5-0 home hammering in the Suwon World Cup Stadium. — AFP



DORTMUND: Police officers continue investigations at the scene following an explosion near a bus carrying the Borussia Dortmund soccer team, in Dortmund, Germany, Tuesday. The first leg of the Champions League quarter final soccer match between Borussia Dortmund and AS Monaco had been postponed after the bus carrying the Dortmund squad was damaged in an explosion, and team player Marc Bartra was hospitalised. — AP

SEVILLA THREATEN ARGENTINA FA OVER SAMPAOLI MOVE

MADRID: La Liga side Sevilla said yesterday they are prepared to take legal action against the Argentine Football Association (AFA) over their plans to poach coach Jorge Sampaoli.

Edgardo Bauza was sacked as national team boss on Monday as the two-time world champions risk missing out on the World Cup next year as they sit fifth in the 10-team South American qualifying group.

New AFA president Claudio Tapia announced his intention to travel to Spain to meet with potential candidates for the job including Sampaoli and Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone, as well as gauging the opinion of senior players like Barcelona duo Lionel Messi and Javier Mascherano.

"Sevilla FC has today sent a letter to the AFA in which it states that, in the case of these comments being true, Sevilla FC would consider it a lack of respect," Sevilla said in a statement.

"And, at the same time, unacceptable any meeting or contact with the coach leading to a breaking of contract with the club, and thus will not think twice about considering their legal options."

Sampaoli is under contract with Sevilla until 2018. However, he has not hidden his

desire to coach Messi either at club level with Barcelona or with the national team.

"I want to manage Messi to be able to watch him from the sideline every day," Sampaoli told Argentine newspaper Ole recently. "It is a unique dream to be able to see the best in the world up close."

Sampaoli's stock has fallen in recent weeks after an excellent start to his debut season coaching in Europe as Sevilla suffered a six-game winless streak prior to Saturday's 4-2 win over Deportivo la Coruna. The 57-year-old is expected to miss out on the Barca job when Luis Enrique steps down at the end of the season, but has proved his credentials at international level. His Chile side beat Argentina on penalties to win the Copa America in 2015.

Simeone has masterminded a huge turnaround in Atletico's fortunes since taking over in December 2011 and has not hidden his ambitions to one day coach Argentina. However, he too is under contract until the end of next season. Whoever takes charge will likely have to do without Messi for three of Argentina's remaining four qualifiers as he was slapped with a four-game ban for insulting an assistant referee in last month's 1-0 win over Chile. — AFP