

BOARD DEBATE NOT A BOTHER TO WENGER

LONDON: Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger insisted any discussions the Gunners' board may be having about his future will not distract him from his job, with the debate about his position showing no sign of stopping. Wenger's contract is up at the end of the season and there has been intense speculation about whether the veteran French manager, in charge at north London giants Arsenal since September 1996, will carry on.

Poor recent results, including Monday's 3-0 defeat by a Crystal Palace side battling to avoid relegation, have only fuelled talk about Wenger's prospects. Wenger has indicated previously he has made a decision about his Arsenal future but that any public announcement will come from the club. "What is

happening at board level is not down to me," said Wenger at a news conference yesterday. "I focus on what is down to me, the performance of the team and what the fans are interested in is the performance of the team."

Arsenal are sixth in the Premier League table and seven points adrift of a Champions League place, with eight league games left to play this season. Theo Walcott suggested after the Palace defeat that the Eagles wanted to win more than the Gunners, adding to the pressure being heaped on the 67-year-old Wenger. But no one in Arsenal's hierarchy, including the club's US-based owner Stan Kroenke, has yet said anything in public to suggest Wenger's position is

under threat, for all that some fans have called for him to resign. And Wenger insisted yesterday that results such as Monday's loss had not altered his relationship with Kroenke. "I believe our relationship has always been the same and that has not changed." Wenger, asked if anything had changed regarding his future, replied: "Nothing." Following the Palace match, England forward Walcott told Sky Sports: "That wasn't us tonight. We are all disappointed in the changing room, like the fans are. "We let them down. We can only apologise." But then, in comments that angered many Gunners fans, Walcott, Arsenal's captain at Selhurst Park, added: "They (Palace) wanted it more. You could sense that from the kick-off. —AFP

LEICESTER FACE TEST AMID EURO DRAMA

LONDON: Craig Shakespeare must decide whether to focus on securing Leicester's Premier League survival against Crystal Palace or allow his stars to rest before the latest chapter in their European adventure. Shakespeare's side head to Selhurst Park today still licking their wounds after Antoine Griezmann's controversial penalty gave Atletico Madrid a 1-0 victory in the Champions League quarter-final first leg on Wednesday.

It was a bitter defeat for the English champions as the spot-kick was awarded for a Marc Albrighton tackle on Griezmann that took place outside the penalty area. Leicester have the chance to make amends and extend their incredible European run when they host Atletico in the second leg on Tuesday. With little time to recover in between the two ties, Foxes boss Shakespeare is aware two of the biggest matches in his club's history have overshadowed the Palace game, which provides a chance to effectively guarantee Premier League safety.

But Leicester have moved eight points clear of the relegation zone in recent weeks and Shakespeare may well decide to risk resting players in south London on Saturday. "In terms of recovery we've had this fixture planned for a while. We know what it's about," Shakespeare said. "It's a tight turnaround but one that we're more than capable of."

Leicester midfielder Andy King played 45 minutes in Madrid, but the long-serving midfielder is one of the understudies who could be handed a start against Palace and he is determined to concentrate on the task at hand on the domestic front. "There is still a lot of work to be done in the league," King said. "We're in good form and we've got a lot of confidence. Palace are confident as well, it'll be a good game but we need to make sure we're ready."

SURVIVAL BATTLE

Robert Huth also seems certain to start at Selhurst Park, with the German defender suspended for the second leg against Atletico. Sam Allardyce will attempt to ensure Palace avoid another setback in the wake of an unexpected victory against one of the leading teams. Palace go into the game on the back of Monday's stunning 3-0 defeat of Arsenal, a win that extended their recent run to five victories in six games and moved them six points clear of the relegation zone.

Confidence is high, but Allardyce and his players are well aware of what happened in the wake of the recent win at Chelsea when they travelled to Southampton and lost 3-1. That defeat, together with improved results for some of their relegation rivals, provided a warning that nothing can be taken for granted as the survival battle intensifies.

Allardyce, though, can be satisfied his key players are finding their best form when it matters most, with Christian Benteke, Yohan Cabaye and Wilfried Zaha outstanding in recent weeks. "Certainly Chelsea away, a little blip at Southampton, then Arsenal at home. The two victories were such great victories, in such a short space of time, but it was well deserved," Allardyce said. "If we can perform like that in any of the last seven games, we can beat any team. Our performances have to be to that level, so we get safe and can start preparing for next season. "One or two more results and we should be safe." — AFP



LIVERPOOL: In this Tuesday, Jan 31, 2017 file photo, Chelsea's David Luiz, front left, celebrates scoring a goal against Liverpool with Chelsea's manager Antonio Conte and players during their English Premier League soccer match at Anfield stadium. — AP

ALONSO WARY OF UNITED, SPURS READY TO POUNCE

LONDON: Chelsea defender Marcos Alonso has warned the leaders to beware of a Manchester United backlash, while Mauricio Pochettino believes Tottenham can provide a dramatic finale to the title race. With just seven games remaining, Chelsea are looking to land the knockout blow as they slug it out with second placed Tottenham in the fight for Premier League supremacy.

Antonio Conte's side hold a seven point lead at the top, but Tottenham can temporarily trim the gap to four if they beat Bournemouth at White Hart Lane in today's early kick-off. Alonso admits that would pile the pressure back on Chelsea, who face a tricky trip to Old Trafford to face a United team fuelled by a revenge mission on Sunday. Managed by former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho, United have already endured a humiliating 4-0 thrashing at Chelsea in October and an acrimonious 1-0 loss on their return to Stamford Bridge in the FA Cup quarter-finals in March. But Mourinho's fifth placed team, four points behind fourth placed Manchester City in the Champions League qualification scrap, are unbeaten in their 21 league matches since that first painful loss to Chelsea this season. "It will be tougher this time around. They are one of the best teams in England, no doubt," Alonso said.

"It will be a very hard game, even more so after losing twice against us. They will give even more to try and beat us. "We will have to do the same or more than before to get another win. They will be hard to beat. We will have to be ready." Chelsea, unbeaten in their last 12 meetings with United, have won back to back matches since their shock defeat against Crystal Palace, but Tottenham remain hot on their heels.

'FIGHTING FOR BIGGER THINGS'

Pochettino's side have reeled off six successive victories, sparking dreams of winning the club's first English title since 1961 and finishing above bitter rivals Arsenal for the first time since 1995. They currently sit 14 points clear of Arsenal, but Pochettino is understandably more concerned about catching Chelsea than earning north London bragging rights. "I think we're playing and fighting for bigger things," said Pochettino, who may hand a first start to Harry Kane since the striker's ankle injury five weeks ago. "If we look at the bigger picture it's to try to reduce the gap with Chelsea. I think today it's not important the gap we have with Arsenal. "The most important thing is to do our job, try to win games and try to reduce the gap with Chelsea."

FURIOUS

Arsene Wenger and his Arsenal flops head to Middlesbrough looking to redeem themselves in the eyes of their furious fans after their shocking 3-0 defeat at lowly Crystal Palace on Monday. Subjected to vitriolic abuse from supporters during their fifth defeat in their last eight games and labelled as "cowards" by former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher, Wenger's sixth placed side can't afford another debacle as they try to close the seven-point gap on the top four. Wenger, who endured calls for his resignation, has led Arsenal into the Champions League for the last 19 years, but that record is in severe danger and a defeat at the Riverside Stadium might usher the beleaguered Frenchman towards the exit. "This isn't Arsenal in this moment in time. — AFP