

Sports

Inter into Coppa quarters at San Siro closed after racist chanting

Two late goals from Chiesa as Fiorentina beat battling Torino

MILAN: Inter Milan cruised into the quarter-finals of the Coppa Italia on Sunday after beating second-tier Benevento 6-2 in a match played behind closed doors following the racist abuse of Senegal defender Kalidou Koulibaly last month.

Inter ran riot in a San Siro left empty as part of the punishment the club received for the monkey chants directed at Koulibaly during their 1-0 Boxing Day win over Napoli. "That wasn't a real match tonight," said Inter coach Luciano Spalletti. "The protagonists of the game are the fans, who should come and have fun watching the show on the pitch."

"We can't deprive good people of enjoyment because others disturb the match (with their behaviour). We need to reward that type of fan, who needs to take a stand against the chants they don't want to take part in."

Spalletti's side were two up inside seven minutes thanks to a roaring start that saw Mauro Icardi open the scoring from the spot following a foul on Antonio Candreva, who was on hand to crash home after striker Icardi hit the post from a corner to double the hosts' lead.

The tie was put beyond doubt in first-half stoppage time when Dalbert collected Ivan Perisic's pass and thumped in the third, and Croat Perisic was on hand again shortly after the break to cross for Lautaro Martinez to make it four with his head.

Benevento forward Roberto Insigne smashed home a free-kick that his brother Lorenzo, in action later for Napoli against Sassuolo, would have been proud of, but Martinez scored again in the 66th minute to mean that

Filippo Bandinelli's goal for the away side was nothing more than a second consolation.

Candreva's second deep into added time was the cherry on the cake for Spalletti's side, who in the quarters will take on Lazio, embroiled in a racism scandal of their own. Their 4-1 thumping of third-division Novara at Rome's Stadio Olimpico on Saturday was sullied by racist and anti-Semitic chanting dismissed by the club as a "psychosis focusing on a minority or non-existent incidents".

Lazio's notorious hardcore ultra fans aimed a series of ugly barbs at their bitter city rivals Roma as their side ran up a four-goal lead before half-time, taunting them with chants of "Yellow, red and Jewish" and "This Roma that looks like Africa".

Lazio spokesman Arturo Diaconale blasted reports of the chanting by a small section of the crowd as "a psychosis", and said that "98 percent" of the crowd did not even hear them. Napoli will take on AC Milan in the last eight after goals from Arkadiusz Milik and Fabian Ruiz saw off Sassuolo at the Stadio San Paolo in Naples on Sunday. Milan beat Sampdoria 2-0 on Saturday.

Earlier on Sunday two late goals from Federico Chiesa saw Fiorentina beat battling Torino, who were the more dangerous side throughout the match but were knocked out thanks to a brace in the final three minutes from the Italy international.

The Viola will host one of Roma or Virtus Entella from third-tier Serie C, who play today after Cagliari and Atalanta face off in an all-Serie A clash. On Saturday, Juventus booked their place in the last eight with a 2-0 win at Bologna. —AFP



NAPLES: Napoli's Senegalese defender Kalidou Koulibaly acknowledges the public at the end of the Italian Tim Cup round of sixteen football match Napoli vs Sassuolo on Sunday at the San Paolo stadium in Naples. —AFP

Australia union seeks help for detained Bahraini refugee player

DUBAI: The head of the Australian soccer players union wants the sport's regional governing body to help secure the release of a Bahraini refugee footballer arrested in Thailand in November over a prison sentence in his homeland.

Hakeem Al Araibi, who played in Australia but had flown out for his honeymoon, was arrested in November in Bangkok on an Interpol notice issued at Bahrain's request. The former member of Bahrain's national soccer team, a critic of the government, was convicted of vandalising a police station and sentenced to 10 years in prison in absentia.

He has denied wrongdoing. John Didulica, chief executive of Professional Footballers Australia (PFA), said the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), whose head is a member of Bahrain's ruling family, should intervene for his freedom.

Didulica said Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al-Khalifa, as AFC president, was obliged to safeguard footballers' rights, but he had seen no evidence of action. "That's a huge failure on their behalf and must be remedied," he told Reuters at a hotel in Dubai on Sunday while attending the Asian Cup.

Sheikh Salman could not be reached for comment. When asked by Reuters to respond, an AFC spokesman said: "The AFC is working with many stakeholders including FIFA, and as this work is ongoing we will make no further comment."

A Bahrain government spokesperson said there was no threat to Araibi's life and he could appeal if he returned. "The two people convicted with him appealed



Hakeem Al Araibi (centre)

against their convictions and were found not guilty under due legal process by Bahrain's independent judiciary," the spokesperson said.

Union head Didulica said failure to work towards Araibi's return to Australia, where he was granted asylum in 2017 after fleeing Bahrain three years earlier, could make Sheikh Salman's candidacy for AFC re-election "untenable".

Araibi was a vocal critic of Sheikh Salman, a cousin of Bahrain's king, when he contested the FIFA presidential election in 2015. During the campaign, which he lost to

Gianni Infantino, Sheikh Salman was strongly criticised by some rights groups.

Sheikh Salman denies he was involved in investigating and prosecuting athletes active in Bahrain's 2011 protests. Activists have called on authorities to "show humanity" to Araibi in the same way they did to an 18-year-old Saudi woman who fled from her family to Thailand.

Human Rights Watch said Araibi was tortured by Bahraini authorities because of his brother's political activities during the Arab Spring uprising in 2011. Bahraini authorities deny allegations of torture. —Reuters

Guardiola in hunt for 'new' Fernandinho

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola has acknowledged finding a long-term replacement for Fernandinho is becoming a matter of increasing urgency for Manchester City. The 33-year-old Brazilian has become one of the most important players in City's line-up during Guardiola's three seasons at the club, with his hard work and passing ability as a holding midfielder providing both security in front of the defence and scope for the team to attack.

Reigning champions City have lost just one of the 19 Premier League matches in which Fernandinho has played, whereas they have been defeated in both of the games he has missed. Guardiola does not appear to have a deputy of the same quality—John Stones, normally a centre-back, struggled in the role when Crystal Palace won at the Etihad Stadium on December 22, while Ilkay Gundogan has not been entirely convincing either.

City have been linked with a move for Frankie de Jong from Ajax at the end of this season, but the Dutch midfielder is attracting significant interest from other clubs too. Guardiola acknowledges he cannot expect Fernandinho, signed from Shakhtar

Donetsk in 2013, to play as much for City as he gets older, adding a solution has to be found for next season.

"It's not easy to find the specific quality of the players," said Guardiola. "Maybe there aren't many, but there are players who can play in that role." The former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss added: "Specifically with Fernandinho's role, it's so difficult to find. He knows the Premier League, after three years together here, he knows everything and that's so important."

"But, of course, for the next season it's an important target to find. He'll be 34 and he cannot play every few days." There have been reports in British newspapers suggesting Wolves' Portuguese midfielder Ruben Neves may be a long-term replacement for Fernandinho, although their roles are slightly different.

Neves, whose Wolves side visit the Etihad, tends to play as one of two holding midfielders, whereas Fernandinho performs that role on his own in the City line-up. "Ruben Neves is an excellent player," said Guardiola, whose second-placed side will be looking to cut Liverpool's seven-point lead at the top of the table.

"The system at Wolves involves playing with two holding midfielders, not just one. But he's an excellent player. There are many clubs in the world, many holding midfielders in the world, and most of them can play here. That's not the point. The point is that most of them are under contracts."



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola gestures on the touchline during the English FA Cup third round football match between Manchester City and Rotherham United at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. —AFP

But Guardiola insisted, for all City's wealth, there were limits to even their transfer budget.

"A month ago, I started reading: 'Ruben Neves, £100 million (\$129 million, 112 million euros)'. That is not going to happen. We are not going to pay £100 million for a holding midfielder. Of course, all departments in the club, we have in every position four or five or six options (potential targets) — depending on age, what we believe and, of course, the price."

Despite the likelihood of losing out on De Jong, Guardiola has no qualms over the work being done by City director of football Txiki Begiristain

and his team to bring in top-class players. "I would say they are incredible, top at what they are doing. It looks simple but it's not simple. It looks easy but it's not easy," said Guardiola.

"I am in touch quite often with Txiki, especially, because he is close to my door. I know exactly what they do, with the (City) academy, with the first team and they are doing it really well." "But sometimes it doesn't depend on us," said the Catalan manager.

"You have to pay the club, pay the family and talk with the players, and with the agents, it's nuts. It's complicated, so, so complicated." —AFP

Solskjaer basks in win against Spurs but has work to do

LONDON: Manchester United's victory against Tottenham is a statement win for Ole Gunnar Solskjaer but the team's reliance on David de Gea's heroics in goal show the interim boss still has work to do. Solskjaer had won all five of his games as interim United boss before Sunday's Premier League match at Wembley, seen as the first major test of his reign.

The Norwegian got his tactics spot on in the first half of a match billed as a face-off between the two favourites for the full-time job at Old Trafford, with Mauricio Pochettino in the opposition dugout.

Spurs dominated possession in the opening minutes but United's fleet-footed trio of Marcus Rashford, Anthony Martial and Jesse Lingard looked to counter-attack at every opportunity. The approach paid off just before half-time when the impressive Paul Pogba delivered a raking cross-field ball for Rashford to run onto and the England man drove the ball emphatically past Hugo Lloris, leading to wild scenes of celebration on the bench.

But the second half was a different story as Spurs came forward in relentless waves, only to find De Gea in unbeatable form. Former United defender Gary Neville hailed the impact his former Old Trafford teammate Solskjaer has had since he replaced the sacked Jose Mourinho last month.

"Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is picking the profile of player Manchester United need and that's players who have the energy to get from box to box quickly and counter-attack with quality," the Sky Sports pundit said on his podcast.

"You've seen that in the last few weeks. At Wembley, it was the acid test. It was the moment where people said could he live in a big game and could he live against the big managers. Second half I thought it was about spirit, desire and hanging on a little bit. The players were playing for the manager."

SOLSKJAER FAVOURITE?

The hard-fought victory at Wembley certainly boosts Solskjaer's chances of staying at Old Trafford beyond the end of this season and some British bookmakers now make him the favourite ahead of Pochettino.

The Norwegian has done little wrong since he took over an unhappy club from Mourinho, reinvigorating Pogba and Rashford and tightening a leaky defence—the clean sheet against Spurs was just United's fourth of the Premier League campaign.

Solskjaer hailed De Gea as "the best goalkeeper in the world" after the Spaniard's 11 saves and praised his defence but he acknowledged it was tough going after the break. —AFP

Live		Matches on TV
		(Local Timings)
FRENCH LEAGUE		
SCO Angers v FC Girondins de Bordeaux	beIN SPORTS	21:00
ASIAN NATIONS CUP 2019		
Australia v Syria	beIN SPORTS	16:30
Palestine v Jordan	beIN SPORTS	16:30