

Sports

French enquiry blames organizers for Champions League final fiasco

Champions League final chaos caused by 'dysfunctions', not supporters

PARIS: An enquiry by the French Senate into crowd chaos at this year's Champions League final in Paris concluded that organizers were to blame, not supporters, undermining claims by the police and Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin. A fact-finding mission led by two senators was set up after the Liverpool-Real Madrid game on May 28 which was marred by a delayed kick-off, crushes, teargas and street crime.

The investigation concluded that the problems were caused by a "string of dysfunctions" including a lack of preparation by French authorities and European football body UEFA, as well as poorly executed security arrangements. "These dysfunctions were at every level, not only during the implementation but also during preparations in advance," the co-chair of the enquiry Laurent Lafon told reporters at a press conference.

The final report contradicted repeated statements from Darmanin that Liverpool fans were mostly responsible, with the minister claiming that up to 40,000 of them travelled to the stadium either with no tickets or with fake ones. "The first statements (by the minister) do not match up with reality," Francois-Noel Buffet, a fellow co-chair of the investigation, told reporters.

"It was not because there were Liverpool supporters who travelled with their team that things went badly," Lafon added, noting that thousands of fans without tickets had been welcomed in fanzones set up in the French capital. Those with tickets struggled to travel to the stadium because of a transport strike, then found themselves in bottlenecks and crushes at the entry gates. Faced with the build up of frustrated crowds around the Stade de France, police used tear gas and pepper spray to move them back, affecting many children as well as disabled fans in wheelchairs.

After the game, supporters were preyed on by local gangs as they made their way to local transport connections, with many reporting pickpocketing, muggings and threats as the police looked on. The tele-

vised events were a national embarrassment and are thought to have influenced parliamentary elections in June when President Emmanuel Macron lost his majority. They caused alarm bells just a year from the start of rugby World Cup, which will be held in France, and the 2024 Paris Olympics.

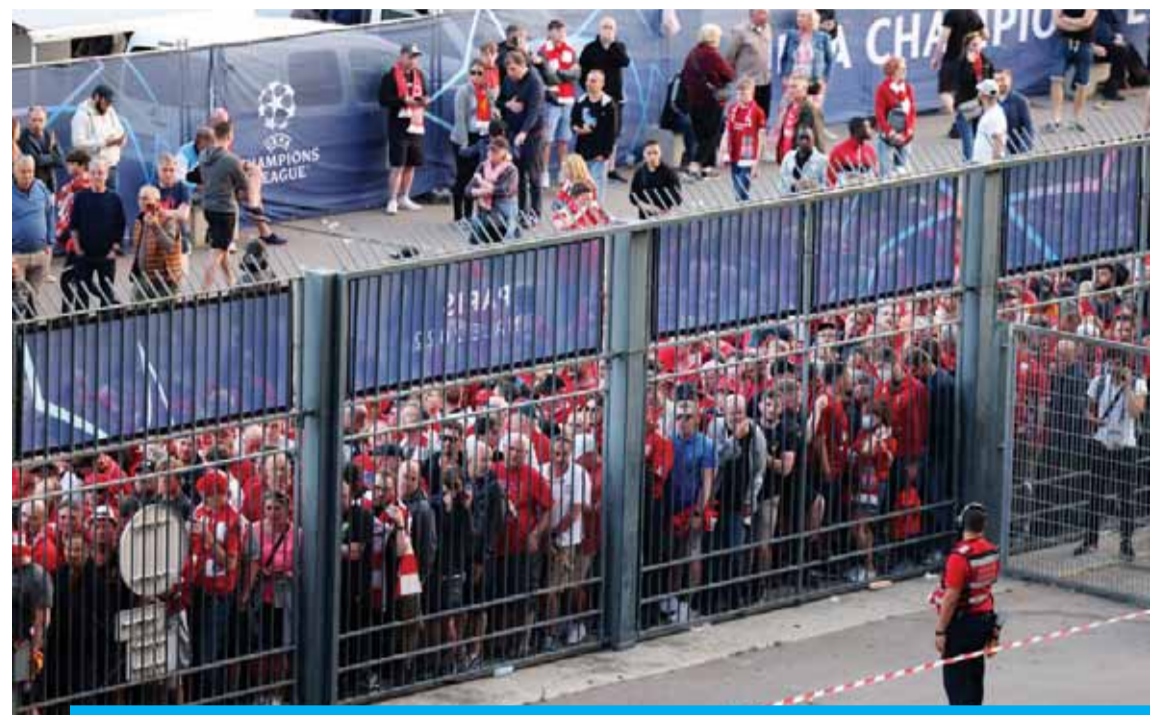
'Failure'

Darmanin survived a recent government reshuffle and has been given extra responsibility as interior minister despite his claims, which caused fury in Liverpool and tensions with the British government. Liverpool football club is particularly sensitive to the scapegoating of its fans after they were falsely blamed for the Hillsborough stadium disaster in Sheffield in 1989. Supporters' group Spirit of Shankly thanked the Senate on Wednesday for "welcoming the testimonies of fans and consequently vindicating them from any responsibility," but said this was not enough.

"We want a full apology from the French government with a complete retraction of the lies purported on their behalf on and since 28 May 2022, and will continue to lobby to achieve it," it said in a statement. Darmanin, a law-and-order hardliner, issued his first partial apology at the end of June, telling RTL radio: "Should things have been managed better at the Stade de France (stadium)? The answer is yes. Am I partly responsible? The answer is yes."

The head of the Paris police, Didier Lallement, admitted during a Senate hearing on June 9 that security operations had been a "failure" and offered his excuses to fans who were unable to attend the game. But he defended the use of teargas to move fans back from the stadium, saying there was "no other way." The Senate commission did not recommend any sanctions against the police or Darmanin. "The role of a commission like ours is not to call for the resignation of someone in the government," Buffet explained.

Instead, its final report made a series of recommen-



PARIS: In this file photograph, Liverpool fans stand outside unable to get in time leading to the match being delayed prior to the UEFA Champions League final football match between Liverpool and Real Madrid at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, north of Paris. - AFP

dations to authorities to improve security arrangements at major sporting events. France is to host the Rugby World Cup next year and the Olympics in 2024. The Senate report recommended that the police draw up clearer guidelines for the use of teargas and adopt other crowd-control methods such as greater use of mounted officers and water cannons.

Authorities have also been under pressure to explain

why security camera footage from the stadium was not saved, removing a potentially vital source of information for investigators. "The images will always be missing. That's our biggest regret," Buffet said. European football body UEFA is also conducting a parallel investigation into the debacle which came after France offered to host the game when it was stripped from Russia over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. —AFP

Germany see off Spain to reach Euro quarters

BRENTFORD: Germany booked their place in the Euro 2022 quarter-finals as Klara Buhl and Alexandra Popp sealed a 2-0 win against Spain on Tuesday. Martina Voss-Tecklenburg's side crushed Denmark 4-0 in their opening fixture, but had to show their more gritty side to see off Spain. Germany had only two shots on target and just 30 percent of the possession, but their opportunistic finishing proved the difference at Brentford's Community Stadium.

Buhl gave Germany the perfect start with her third minute opener and Popp doubled the lead eight minutes before half-time. Germany sit top of Group B with maximum points after two successive victories, while Spain are in second place with three points. Bottom of the group Finland, beaten 1-0 by Denmark earlier on Tuesday, were eliminated by the result from the day's late game.

Spain were one of the pre-tournament favourites, but now sit level on points with Denmark, who they face on Saturday in a shoot-out to decide who will

advance along with Germany. Germany, eight-time European champions, were gifted the lead when Spain goalkeeper Sandra Panos tried to make a clearance from a routine back-pass but the ball struck Buhl, who turned inside Irene Paredes to drill a low shot into the bottom corner.

Spain were suddenly presented with a golden chance to score themselves when Lucia Garcia was played clear of a high German backline. The Athletic Bilbao forward raced into the penalty area and took the ball wide of goalkeeper Merle Frohms, but sent her angled shot into the side netting. Spain continued to press for an equaliser as Mariona Caldentey fired a dipping effort from the edge of the box just wide.

It was Germany, though, who were on target again seven minutes before half-time. A corner was floated over into the six-yard box, where captain Alexandra Popp got up to flick in a backward header via a slight deflection. Spain looked to regroup once more and went close again just before the break when Aitana Bonmati's chipped effort dropped just wide. Wolfsburg forward Popp almost had a third for Germany soon after the restart when she headed wide at the back post from a corner.

Popp was centre stage again as the hour mark approached, going down under what looked like a tug on the front of her shirt from Spain captain Paredes as she aimed to run clear on goal. French referee



LONDON: Spain's midfielder Patricia Guijarro (left) vies for a header with Germany's defender Kathrin Hendrich during the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 Group B football match between Germany and Spain at Brentford Community Stadium in west London on July 12, 2022. —AFP

Stephanie Frappart waved play on and VAR did not overturn the decision. Spain almost pulled a goal back with 18 minutes left when a deep ball was floated into the penalty area and Caldentey sent a volley goalwards, which was brilliantly tipped over by Frohms. —AFP

Rooney excited for challenge as new DC United head coach

WASHINGTON: Former England and Manchester United star Wayne Rooney was named on Tuesday as the new head coach of DC United and has been tasked with reviving the moribund Major League Soccer team. It was a reunion for the 36-year-old British icon, who played for DC United from July 2018 to October 2019, scoring 25 goals in 52 appearances before leaving to serve as a player and coach at England's Derby County. "To come back to MLS, to DC United, was an exciting challenge for me and something which I feel can develop me as a coach, but also the team needs to improve," Rooney said. "I'm an ambitious person. One day I want to manage at the top level. This is part of that process."

DC United stands 5-10 with two drawn on 17 points, sharing last overall in the 28-team league. United fired coach Heman Losada after six matches, replacing him with interim manager Chad Ashton. "I really believe with my abilities to develop young players, we can really get this club back to successful ways again," Rooney said. "It's going to take a lot of hard work but that's what I'm here to do and really improve the team." Rooney resigned as coach of Derby County last month after the team's relegation to League One, England's third-tier, opening the door to his MLS return.

"I've seen a few (news articles) certainly back in England on this as possibly a backward step in my managerial career," Rooney said. "I really find that disrespectful to this league. I feel the experience of guiding Derby County over the past 18 months has been great in my development as a coach." DC United hasn't made the playoffs since Rooney helped the squad get there in 2018 and 2019 as a player, but must duplicate his revival of a league-worst club from four years ago to reach the post-season.

"There a mentality I have to put into the players so when they go on the pitch they become a real horrible team to play against," Rooney said. "That's exciting. That's what I plan on doing. We know it's going to be difficult. We have to go on a good run. They know how I want to play. If we can do that right off, then why can't we make the playoffs?" Philadelphia beat DC United 7-0 last week, matching the league record for the largest margin of defeat. "I believe they have been underperforming," Rooney said. "I believe there's a lot more for those players to give."

DC United's next match is Wednesday at home against Columbus but Rooney awaits final visa paperwork before his official coaching role can begin. DC's following match is Saturday at Minnesota. Rooney's family will stay in England but he said, "That's not an issue whatsoever," and that he had support from his wife to take the job. "I'm excited to bring my skills," Rooney said. "It's going to be a lot of hard work I have to put in. I'll have demands and principles the players will have to stick by. I want players to come to this club who are hungry. I'm committed to getting the best out of myself and the players."

DC United captain Steve Birnbaum was a former Rooney teammate and says players are looking forward to learn from Rooney. "The group is excited to have him," Birnbaum said. "We know the energy and passion that he brought as a player and we know he's going to do the same thing as a coach. The guys are excited to learn from him. He has a soccer IQ that's probably second to none. The group is extremely excited to see him uplift us." —AFP

Underdogs Queensland stun NSW 22-12 to win Origin thriller

BRISBANE: Underdogs Queensland stunned New South Wales 22-12 in a thrilling State of Origin decider to clinch the series 2-1 against the odds in Brisbane on Wednesday. An emotional Queensland Maroons, reduced to just 15 fit men after a brutal start to the game that saw them lose two players to concussion in the opening minutes, celebrated wildly at the end in front of 50,000 fans packed into Suncorp Stadium. A flurry of mistakes from the NSW Blues allowed depleted Queensland to find reserves of energy and dominate possession in the second half, keeping an exhausted New South Wales from further scoring after they led 12-10 at the break.

"It is what Queensland is all about. Hard work and really digging in when backs are against the wall. We did it again tonight," said Queensland hooker Ben Hunt, who scored the match-winning try with less than two minutes remaining. The Maroons had won the first game in Sydney, while New South Wales fought back on neutral territory in Perth to force a winner-takes-all showdown. Before kickoff Queensland lost five-eighth Cameron Munster and wing Murray Taulagi to COVID, leaving New South Wales as strong favorites.

A torrid opening four minutes saw Blues second row Cameron Murray forced off after being concussed in tackle with Queensland's Selwyn Cobbo and Lindsay Collins suffering the same fate in quick succession. Despite the setback it was Queensland's Valentine Holmes who made the breakthrough, crashing his way through in the 14th minute. New South Wales were quick to respond, as centre Jarome Luai dived to score off a kick four minutes later.



BRISBANE: Queensland's Kalyn Ponga (right) beats the tackle of New South Wales' Stephen Crichton during the State of Origin rugby league match between Queensland and New South Wales in Brisbane on July 13, 2022. —AFP

The Blues continued to be relentless in attack and were rewarded with a try through bench player Jacob Safiti. But Queensland got fortunate seconds before half-time, when a defensive error led to Kurt Capewell getting over the line to reduce the deficit to only two points. "We made too many mistakes as well and you can't do it in Origin games," said New South Wales half-back Nathan Cleary. The physical battle during the first half was intense and did not let up after the break.

Opposing centers Dane Gagai and Matt Burton

already submitted an official bid to the Asian Football Confederation to host the 24-team competition, scheduled for June and July 2023. When asked if the Japan Football Association planned to bid, JFA technical director Yasuharu Sorimachi told reporters "we are considering it but there is little chance".

China was due to host the tournament but pulled out in May due to challenges related to its strict zero-COVID strategy. The AFC invited new bids to host the quadrennial competition and set a deadline of June 30, which was then extended until July 15.

Japan, who have won the Asian Cup four times, last hosted the tournament in 1992.

South Korea has not hosted the Asian Cup since 1960, the only time it has staged the event. COVID restrictions have pushed China off the global sporting map. In May, organizers of the Olympic-sized Asian Games, due to be held in September in Hangzhou, postponed the event over logistical problems caused by COVID. The World University Games, originally set to be held in Chengdu in June, were also postponed for a second time due to "continued uncertainty over conditions". —AFP

JFA: Little chance of Japan hosting 2023 Asian Cup

TOKYO: Japanese football chiefs said Wednesday there is "little chance" they will bid to replace China as hosts of next year's Asian Cup, two days before the deadline to declare interest. South Korea has