



NYON, Switzerland: President of the Portuguese Football Federation Fernando Soares Gomes da Silva (L), President of the Spanish Football Federation Luis Rubiales (C), and President of the Ukraine Football Federation Andriy Pavelko pose during a press conference announcing Spain, Portugal and Ukraine's bid for the 2030 World Cup at the UEFA headquarters in Nyon. —AFP

European football 'united' as Ukraine joins Spain, Portugal 2030 WCup bid

Bid was more than a symbol of faith in our joint victory: Zelensky

NYON, Switzerland: Ukrainian football association (UAF) president Andriy Pavelko said European football was "united" after his country was added to Portugal and Spain's bid to host the 2030 World Cup.

The original proposal from Spain and Portugal was announced two years ago but has been given a political impetus by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "United as never before, the European football family, having condemned the crimes against the Ukrainian people, proved its commitment to the values that underlie our organisation," Pavelko told reporters.

"I thank you and all the friendly national associations for the help on behalf of thousands of little players-girls and boys from Mariupol, Kharkiv, Kherson, Irpin, Bucha and many other cities that were subjected to barbaric military aggression."

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky said the bid was "more than a symbol of faith in our joint victory". "Ukraine will endure, prevail and be rebuilt thanks to the solidarity of its partners," Zelensky said on Twitter.

He added that it was "very symbolic" that two EU

nations were in a position to organise the tournament together with aspiring member Ukraine, in a video published on social media. On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into legislation his annexation of four Ukrainian territories as the EU agreed a new round of sanctions against Moscow in response.

In recent weeks, Ukraine's forces, bolstered by Western weapons, have wrested Russian troops out of a string of towns and villages in the east and in the south. "These children were forced to leave their homes, their clubs and football schools, fleeing from bullets and shells," Pavelko said.

"Many of them received your support and found shelter in various European countries. "Now they can continue to play football in European clubs and have made new friends all over Europe. "The war will end, and we will organise World Cup 2030 matches together with Spain and Portugal at the highest level."

War-torn Ukraine applied for European Union membership just five days after Russia's February 24 invasion

and the bloc accepted the candidacy in June. "Ukraine's participation in the bid to host the 2030 World Cup is also important for the unification and strengthening of Europe in these difficult times," Pavelko said.

"A few months ago, Ukraine received the status of a candidate for EU membership, and in the coming years we hope to obtain full membership. "The joint holding of the 2030 World Cup with Spain and Portugal will be a vivid historical event that will symbolise the unity of Europe from Lisbon to Kyiv, Donetsk, Lugansk and Sevastopol."

The vote to host the 2030 World Cup is expected to take place in 2024.

UEFA support

The Spanish football federation (RFEF) said in a statement the idea was backed by UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin. "The institutional headquarters are in Madrid, the administrative headquarters are in Lisbon. Now the Ukrainian delegation will unite with us," RFEF president Luis Rubiales said.

"In the coming months, we will come to work on practicalities." Portugal held the 2004 European Championship and Spain hosted the 1982 World Cup, while Ukraine was a joint host of Euro 2012 with Poland.

"The example of tenacity and resilience set by the Ukrainian people is inspiring," the Portuguese football federation (FPF) said. The FPF added the joint bid "aims to contribute through the power of football to the recovery of a country undergoing reconstruction".

It added the terms of Ukraine's role in the bid "will be discussed and defined in due course". It follows the announcement last month from an Egyptian official that Egypt, Greece and Saudi Arabia are in talks to jointly host the 2030 World Cup.

In August, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Paraguay launched their bid to host the event—which is the centenary of the first World Cup, held in Uruguay—with the hope of bringing the global showpiece back to its first home. The 2026 edition has already been awarded to three countries—Canada, Mexico and the United States. —AFP

Real Madrid take control in Europe with Shakhtar win

MADRID, Spain: Real Madrid established a stranglehold at the top of their Champions League group with a 2-1 win over Shakhtar Donetsk on Wednesday, which should have been far more emphatic. Carlo Ancelotti's reigning champions have a 100 percent record in the competition and made light work of their Ukrainian opponents, who had to travel 10 hours to get to Madrid because of the war in their homeland. Rodrygo and Vinicius Junior's goals made the difference but the record 14-time winners were dominant and only prolific finishing—and fine goalkeeping from Anatoliy Trubin—stopped them from racking up a big lead.

After three games Madrid have a five-point lead on second-placed Shakhtar, with RB Leipzig, third, beating Celtic 3-1 in the other Group F match. "There are days like this, when the ball doesn't want to go in," said Madrid midfielder Toni Kroos. "It was a game we could have won 7-1 or something like that, but in the end it's three points, that's the important thing."

"The idea is to qualify as soon as possible, we've got all the points we can, it's not possible to do better. We want to win next week too (against Shakhtar) and seal qualification." Karim Benzema led the line again on his second match back after injury and although he was still rusty, it didn't matter on a mostly comfortable evening.

Rodrygo broke the deadlock with a low effort from outside the area, curled home after 13 minutes. He was



MADRID, Spain: Shakhtar Donetsk Ukrainian midfielder Oleksandr Zubkov (R) scores his team's first goal during the UEFA Champions League 1st round day 3 group F football match between Real Madrid and Shakhtar Donetsk, at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid. —AFP

not punished for a loose first touch as the ball bounced back to him and stroked it past Trubin. Benzema, sniffing around for a goal to ignite his season, fired in a low effort which Trubin parried, as Madrid pinned the visitors back.

Vinicius, who left two Shakhtar defenders for dead by scooping the ball through the gap between them and darting through to delight the Santiago Bernabeu, soon added the second. The Brazilian put the finishing touches on an intricate team move, with Benzema feeding Rodrygo, to caress the ball into the bottom corner.

Vinicius had another shot cleared off the line by Valeriy Bondar, with Madrid angling for a third to put the game out of sight, while Benzema slashed a volley off-target. The overworked Trubin denied Vinicius and then Benzema in quick succession as Madrid poured forward, determined to right the wrongs of their draw with Osasuna on Sunday, the first points they have dropped all season in any competition. —AFP

PSG held at Benfica despite Messi stunner

LISBON: Paris Saint-Germain were forced to settle for a 1-1 draw away to Benfica in the Champions League on Wednesday despite Lionel Messi's brilliant curling strike. The Argentina star scored midway through the first half in Lisbon but Danilo Pereira's own goal before the break ensured PSG and Benfica remain level at the top of Group H on seven points.

Both clubs failed to win for just the second time this season in all competitions but are four points clear of Juventus, who bounced back from successive defeats to beat Maccabi Haifa 3-1 at home. "We know it's difficult to play at this ground, with this atmosphere. Benfica are a team in form," PSG captain Marquinhos told Canal Plus.

Messi only scored 11 goals in 34 games in his first season for PSG last term, but already has eight in 13 this time around. "It's normal, it takes a little time," said Marquinhos. "Now he feels a little more comfortable... I hope Leo Messi has a great season until the end to win this title."

Sitting top of the Portuguese league despite dropping their first points at the weekend, Benfica's high pressing rattled PSG as the hosts made a bright start. Goncalo Ramos, who drew interest in the summer from PSG, saw his effort blocked by Gianluigi Donnarumma's leg after he raced onto a long ball in behind the defence.

Ramos then stung the palms of Donnarumma from distance before the Italy goalkeeper produced a terrific save to deflect David Neres' shot wide.



LISBON, Portugal: Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar scissor-kicks the ball during the UEFA Champions League football match between SL Benfica and Paris Saint-Germain, at the Luz stadium in Lisbon. —AFP

Messi's moment of magic

But PSG's vaunted three-man attack of Messi, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe suddenly sparked into life and the visitors surged ahead as the Argentine finished the move he started in style. Messi's pass to Mbappe was helped on to Neymar, whose smart lay-off was whipped into the far top corner first-time by Messi for his 127th Champions League goal. Donnarumma again intervened to deny Benfica by parrying Antonio Silva's strike to safety, but the hosts got the equaliser their play deserved just before half-time. Enzo Fernandez was afforded far too much space to swing in a teasing cross from the left that Danilo inadvertently glanced in as he tried to track Ramos.

Neymar twice went close to restoring PSG's lead early in the second half, clipping the bar with an inventive overhead kick and forcing Odysseas Vlachodimos to punch away his free-kick. Achraf Hakimi could only drill straight at the Benfica 'keeper after being played in by Messi, while Benfica defender Nicolas Otamendi glanced a free-kick just past the post at the other end. —AFP