

## NIGERIA TAKE SLIM LEAD OVER CONGO

**JOHANNESBURG:** Wild finishing restricted dominant Nigeria to a 2-1 victory over Congo Brazzaville at the weekend in a dramatic 2016 Rio Olympic Games football qualifier.

Villain-cum-hero Junior Ajayi scored both goals for the Nigerian 'Dream Team' early in the second half before a capacity 40,000 crowd in south-east city Port Harcourt.

But Moise Nkounkou snatched a potentially crucial away goal on 66 minutes to leave the third-round tie on a knife edge. Celebrated France-born Congo coach Claude Le Roy is hoping to take a team to the Olympics for the first time after a success-filled career with various African countries.

In other first legs, Algeria defeated Sierra Leone 2-0, Morocco edged Tunisia 1-0 and Zimbabwe and South Africa drew 1-1 in a competition restricted to under-23 footballers. A combination of woeful shooting, brave defending and excellent goalkeeping by Congolese giant Christoffer Mafoumbi kept the Port Harcourt match goalless until half-time.

Ajayi was guilty of the worst miss, blazing over from close range at a stadium named after Adokiye Amiesimaka, a retired Nigerian football star who was among the crowd.

But the striker atoned three minutes after half-time when he poked a loose ball into the net after Mafoumbi failed to grasp a low Godwin Saviour cross.

Rattled Congo were two goals behind

six minutes later as Ajayi sneaked unnoticed into the six-yard box and nodded home a cross after Etor Daniel beat out-of-position Mafoumbi to the ball.

Nigeria attacked relentlessly, seeking more goals and a tie-clinching lead ahead of the early August return match in Atlantic city Pointe-Noire.

They had a legitimate penalty appeal for hand-ball rejected by the Kenyan referee and Congolese Junior Makiessie was lucky to escape with a yellow card after a horrific foot-up foul.

Congo halved the deficit against the run of play as Nigerian goalkeeper Daniel Emmanuel cleared the ball with his leg and Nkounkou dashed in to score.

Zimbabwe were fortunate to escape with a draw after South Africa created more chances on an artificial Rufaro Stadium pitch in Harare.

Keegan Dolly gave the visitors a 67th-minute lead that was cancelled when Walter Musona converted a penalty seven minutes from time. Abdelhakim Amokrane scored twice within 21 minutes of the kick-off as Algeria achieved a convincing victory over Sierra Leone at Stade Mustapha Tchaker in Blida near Algiers. Far superior Morocco pipped Tunisia in Rabat thanks to an Achraf Bencherki penalty on the stroke of half-time at Stade Moulay Hassan. The seven third-round winners advance to a November 28-December 12 tournament with hosts Senegal and the top-three finishers qualifying for the Rio Olympics. —AFP



**ZURICH:** FIFA president Sepp Blatter is photographed while banknotes thrown by British comedian Simon Brodtkin hurtle through the air during a press conference following the extraordinary FIFA Executive Committee at the headquarters. —AP

## FIFA SETS ELECTION DATE AS BLATTER RULES HIMSELF OUT

**ZURICH:** FIFA chiefs yesterday recommended proposals to reform the scandal tainted world football body and a special election on February 26 to replace president Sepp Blatter who finally declared he will not be a candidate.

On a dramatic day Blatter was showered with fake dollar bills by a British comedian at the start of a press conference at which he fielded questions about the corruption storm that has engulfed FIFA.

The veteran FIFA president who has been in charge since 1998 — hailed the reforms being recommended but refused to fall in line with one of the key proposals and declare his salary.

He was also repeatedly asked about whether he would stand for office again and finally said: "I will not be a candidate for the election in 2016 and there will be an election for a new president. I cannot be the new president because I am the old president."

Potential candidates are already planning campaigns for the most high profile job in sports politics. French favorite Michel Platini will announce within a fortnight whether he will throw his hat into the ring, according to a source close to the UEFA president.

"He (Platini) is seriously considering running. He will make a decision in the next two weeks maximum and then make an announcement," the source said.

A US corruption investigation which led to the arrest of seven FIFA officials in Zurich on May 27 has left world football reeling and sparked widespread demands for radical change. Blatter, who has been FIFA president for 17 years, won a fifth term as president two days after the police raid. But on June 2 he produced his equally stun-

ning announcement that he would stand down. "I had, with my conscience, to do something for FIFA," Blatter said after an executive committee meeting which set the new election date.

FIFA had been engulfed in "a tsunami", he acknowledged at a press conference delayed by British comic Simon Brodtkin who is a notorious prankster and most recently disrupted rapper Kanye West's performance at the Glastonbury Festival as he threw fake dollars at him before being hauled away by security guards. Blatter hailed the moves toward reforms that government leaders around the world as well as football administrators have demanded.

A task force led by an independent chairman would look at measures including "enhanced centralized integrity checks for executive committee members, the introduction of term limits, higher standards of governance at all levels of football structures including confederations and member associations as well as individual disclosure of compensation," a statement said.

Some sponsors have called for a figure of the stature of former UN secretary general Kofi Annan to head the reform group. Blatter called the reform proposals "important" but refused several demands by journalists to disclose his salary.

The executive meeting came just two days after a former FIFA vice-president, Jeffrey Webb, appeared in a New York court and denied taking millions of dollars of bribes. Webb, from the Cayman islands, was among the seven people detained in Zurich.

US authorities have charged 14 people in all-soccer officials and sports business executives over more than \$150 million in bribes paid to

secure television and marketing contracts for football tournaments. Swiss authorities are in parallel investigating the award of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups to Russia and Qatar respectively.

Candidates for the FIFA presidency have until October 26 to put their names forward. So far only Brazilian football great Zico has officially declared himself. But Platini, the UEFA president, is considered the favorite to take over if he decides to stand.

"He has been pleased to hear a lot of words of support from some of the world's leading football decision makers," said UEFA spokesman Pedro Pinto.

The 60-year-old Frenchman has been boosted after getting verbal support from four of the six regional confederations that make up football's world body, the source close to the UEFA leadership told AFP.

Only the Confederation of African Football (CAF) — led by Blatter ally Issa Hayatou — and the Oceania confederation is not backing Platini.

The UEFA president has been a vociferous critic of Blatter as the corruption scandal has escalated. In a statement, Platini welcomed the proposed FIFA reforms but gave no indication about his election plans. "We must now make sure that the reforms outlined today will be undertaken in a swift and effective manner," he said.

Platini backed Prince Ali bin Al Hussein, a former FIFA vice president from Jordan, when he stood against Blatter in May. The prince could again be a candidate in February's election. Chung Mong-Joon, another former FIFA member from South Korea, is also considering a run. —AFP



**SPAIN:** Barcelona's new president Josep Maria Bartomeu (right) shakes hands with FC management board member Ramon Adell after being elected as president of FC Barcelona at the Camp Nou Stadium. —AP

## ENRIQUE: MESSI NEEDS TO REST

**LOS ANGELES:** The logistics of Barcelona's North American tour are tough enough, coach Luis Enrique makes no apologies for letting stars including Lionel Messi skip the pre-season excursion.

The Spanish giants landed in Los Angeles on Sunday to begin preparations for a three-match tour that opens with a game against Major League Soccer's Los Angeles Galaxy at the Rose Bowl today.

Enrique and captain Andres Iniesta were fresh off the bus from the airport when they met with the media, the team having been cheered upon arrival at their hotel by a gaggle of Barcelona fans.

Asked if he owed those fans a chance to see players like Argentinian superstar Lionel Messi and Brazilian Neymar, Enrique said his first duty was to get those players some much-needed time off.

"That's simple to answer," he said. "We have to give a certain minimum number of days of vacation for players to recover from a season that is seemingly eternal," said Enrique, who has excused Messi, Neymar, goalkeeper Claudio Bravo, midfielder Javier Mascherano and fullback Dani Alvez from the tour after they competed in the Copa America.

"The bottom line is, these players need to rest." After taking on the Galaxy, the Champions League winners will travel north to take on Manchester United at the home of the NFL's San Francisco 49ers on Saturday. They complete their US swing against English champions Chelsea on July 28 in suburban Washington DC.

They will play Fiorentina in Florence on August 2 as part of the same International Champions Cup exhibition tournament. "As a trainer, the truth is I would rather not do tours," Enrique admitted.

Like many other managers, he finds the travel demands and other details take time away from training. "Even though the countries can be great and it can be great to travel, things like the change of time zones can have repercussions and you can have fewer trainings and that can affect the team negatively." Although the tour includes such potentially distracting sidelines as meetings with NBA superstar Kobe Bryant as well as with members of the NBA champion Golden State Warriors, Enrique and Iniesta are both keen to get the focus on the field.

"As far as training goes, the beginning is very important," Iniesta said. "That is what counts because you have not trained for a long time." The team travelled shortly after the re-election of Josep Maria Bartomeu as president of the club by their members.

Incumbent Bartomeu saw off rival Joan Laporta in an election that Bartomeu called early, when tensions within the club were running high because of poor relations between Enrique and Messi.

Enrique declined to address the election on Sunday, while Iniesta said he hoped the resolution would allow the club to focus on trying to repeat the stellar feats of last season, when they won the treble of Champions League, La Liga and Copa Del Rey. —AFP

## US TEAMS EYE GAMES IN CUBA

**WASHINGTON:** Restoring full diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States could lead to Major League Baseball pre-season games on the Communist island by next year and a safer pipeline for Cuban talent. Major League Baseball commissioner Rob Manfred said exhibition games in Cuba ahead of next April's start of the 2016 season "would be my best guess, based on the state of the conversations with the government," according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

As a trade embargo and diplomatic shutdown since the 1960s between Cuba and the United States nears an end, US officials hope to use baseball to make inroads much the same way US officials used table tennis to bridge cultural gaps with China in the 1970s.

"Cuba is a great market for us in two ways. Obviously, it's a great talent market. It's a country where baseball is embedded in the culture," Manfred told the Miami Herald.

"I can envision a situation, assuming this is consistent with the government's policy on Cuba, where we could have ongoing exhibition game activity in Cuba.

"We're going to follow the government's lead on when it makes sense for us to try

to play some games there." Not since the Cincinnati Reds and Los Angeles Dodgers played each other in Cuba in 1959 have two US clubs faced off there, although the Baltimore Orioles played a home-and-home series with Cuba's national team in 1999.

Cuban baseball officials visited the United States earlier this month as their team prepared for the Pan American Games in Canada, telling Major League Baseball's website they are happy about the opportunities for baseball now that barriers are breaking down.

"This is an important and symbolic time for us to be here and we are happy we are here while it's happening," said Cuban baseball commissioner Heriberto Suarez Pereda.

"We are all very pleased with the progress the countries are making." Since US sanctions were imposed on Cuba, 95 players have found their way to Major League Baseball, including stars Yasiel Puig of the Dodgers and Aroldis Chapman of the Reds, but that has required defecting, often in risky journeys run by shady characters through third countries and done for the promise of money from future rich baseball deals. —AFP

## LIVERPOOL DEFEAT ADELAIDE



**AUSTRALIA:** Tarek Elrich of Adelaide and Nathaniel Clyne of Liverpool vie for the ball during the international friendly football match between Adelaide United and English Premier League side Liverpool. —AP

**ADELAIDE:** James Milner scored again as Liverpool downed Adelaide United 2-0 yesterday to win both their pre-season games in Australia before the new English Premier League season.

England midfielder Milner, who joined on a free transfer last month from Manchester City, was on target in the 67th minute for the second time in four days for Liverpool in Australia.

Milner, capped 53 times by his country, scored Liverpool's winner in a 2-1 victory over Brisbane Roar on Friday. Fellow new recruit Danny Ings sealed the victory with Liverpool's second goal in the 88th minute to cap a strong all-round performance by the Merseyside giants before 53,000 at the Adelaide Oval. "I thought the performance was very good tonight against another well-organised team," said Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers. "The pressure and intensity in the game was excellent. "Young players understand and know if they work hard and show the correct personality they'll get a chance.

"Joe Gomez looks like he could be a Liverpool player for many years. I know it's pre-season but he has shown all the qualities and temperament and he's only 18. "Jordan Ibe, I think this could be a big season for him. He's only 19." Liverpool fully stretched Adelaide's defence, with Gomez sweeping along the left flank and the lively Divock Origi a constant threat. Adelaide did not mount a genuine attack until 25 minutes into the game. They can credit two super low saves by goalkeeper Eugene Galekovic for keeping the game scoreless at halftime.

Galekovic produced another top-shelf stop in the 59th minute with a spectacular mid-air parry to deflect an Adam Lallana strike. But eight minutes later Galekovic was finally beaten when Milner scored after a sweet passing movement.

Milner slid onto the end of a curling Ibe cross to poke the ball in with his right foot, although replays suggested he may have been offside. Ings made it safe for Liverpool when put through by a Nathaniel Clyne pass. The former Burnley forward got a touch around the flailing Galekovic to roll the ball into the net. —AFP