

## Sports

# France's Benzema gets one-year suspended term in sex tape case

## Defense team plans to appeal 'very severe, unfair' sentence

VERSAILLES: A French court yesterday gave Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema a one-year suspended sentence for complicity in a bid to blackmail his former France team-mate Matthieu Valbuena with a sex tape.

The sentence, which included a 75,000-euro (\$84,000) fine, was tougher than that sought by prosecutors against the star player over the 2015 extortion attempt, which led Benzema to be cast out of the France team for five-and-a-half years.

Benzema, 33, was not in court in the Paris suburb of Versailles for the verdict, which came hours before Real Madrid took on Sheriff Tiraspol in a Champions League game in Moldova. He was not accused of being behind the extortion attempt but rather of conspiring with the suspected blackmailers by putting pressure on Valbuena to pay them off.

The court ruled that he had "implicated himself personally, through subterfuge and lies, to convince his team-mate to submit to the blackmail". It added that he had shown "no kindness towards Valbuena", as he had claimed, "just the opposite" and had even appeared to take pleasure in his fellow player's demise.

His defense team immediately announced plans for an appeal. Speaking to reporters at the courthouse, one of his lawyers, Sylvain Cormier, said he was "stunned" by the sentence which he called "very severe, unfair and unfounded".

A second lawyer, Antoine Vey, said that Benzema, who did not attend his trial, would "come and explain himself" when the case went to an appeal. The prosecution had called for

Benzema to be given a 10-month suspended sentence.

### 'Not a good Samaritan'

Benzema was one of five people tried over the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to blackmail Valbuena with a sexually explicit video stolen from his phone. He claims he was only trying to help Valbuena when he approached him at the French team's training center in October 2015 and told him he could help him find someone to "manage" the issue of the video.

But prosecutors said his remarks in a phone conversation to a childhood friend also convicted over the extortion attempt — Benzema told his alleged accomplice "he's not taking us seriously" — proved his part in the plot. They added that Benzema's involvement was all the more serious given his leadership role in the French team, which should have made him a model "of hope, fame and moral values."

In Benzema's absence — his lawyers said he was kept away by his professional commitments — Valbuena, 37, monopolized attention at the trial. The midfielder, who also lost his place in the France team over the affair, said the blackmail attempt had left him feeling "frightened" and fearful for his career.

He said that Benzema did not put a figure on the amount sought by the blackmailers to keep the compromising video out of the public domain but was "very insistent" he should do a deal with them. Benzema's four co-accused received sentences ranging from 18 months suspended to two-and-a-half years behind bars.

### Verdict not expected to affect career



BARCELONA: In this file photo taken on October 24, 2021 Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema looks on as he warms up prior to the Spanish League football match between Barcelona and Real Madrid at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. — AFP

### No threat to career

The verdict is not expected to damage Benzema's career, with French football federation president Noel Le Graet saying he could keep his place in Les Bleus even if convicted and Real Madrid also remaining supportive of their star player.

But Benzema's conviction is expected to cast a pall over his stunning comeback to the national team earlier this year after a years-long absence. At club level, Benzema is also having a sensational season, putting him in the running for the Ballon d'Or for the

world's best player, which will be announced on November 29.

Benzema has scored nine times for France since being recalled by manager Didier Deschamps for the Euro 2020 finals — delayed by a year due to the coronavirus pandemic — making him the fifth-highest scorer in the history of Les Bleus. His performances have helped rehabilitate him in the eyes of many French fans and coach Didier Deschamps. "He's no longer the same person, he's matured", Deschamps said last month. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Suspended sentence for Lyon fan

LYON: The Lyon fan who threw a bottle at Marseille captain Dimitri Payet in a weekend Ligue 1 match was on Tuesday handed a six-month suspended prison sentence. Wilfried Serriere, 32, was also banned from Lyon's Parc OL stadium for five years as a result of Sunday's incident. Earlier Tuesday French football chiefs held crisis talks with high ranking French government ministers to identify ways to combat the wave of violence that has rocked Ligue 1 this season. Payet required treatment after being struck on the side of the head as he prepared to take a corner for the visitors in the fifth minute, prompting both teams to return to the changing rooms. A food delivery driver, Serriere was ordered to pay the Marseille skipper one euro in symbolic damages. He apologized to Payet, and said it had not been his intention to hit him.

#### Nigeria lose Osimhen

ROME: Napoli's Nigerian striker Victor Osimhen seems certain to miss the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations as he needs three months to recover from surgery to a smashed cheekbone, the Serie A leaders said on Tuesday. Osimhen suffered multiple face fractures following a clash of heads during Napoli's defeat at Inter Milan on Sunday. The 22-year-old underwent surgery on Tuesday having titanium implants placed in his cheekbone and eye socket. "The player is doing well and will remain under observation for the next few days," said Napoli in a statement. The club said Osimhen was "expected to return to action in three months" which would put him out of contention for the Africa Cup of Nations which runs from January 9 to February 6 in Cameroon.

#### Advocaat quits as Iraq coach

BAGHDAD: The Iraqi Football Federation on Tuesday announced the departure of coach Dick Advocaat after only three months in the job. The veteran Dutch manager, 74, is replaced by Zeljko Petrovic, a federation spokesman said, for the upcoming Arab Cup in Qatar. "Advocaat expressed his deep regret over the disappointing results for the aspirations of the generous Iraqi fans, and for him personally, after he had hoped that the national team would achieve direct qualification for the World Cup in Qatar," spokesman Ahmed Odeh Zamel added.

#### Giants fire Garrett

NEW YORK: New York Giants offensive coordinator Jason Garrett has been sacked after the team's loss to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a statement said Tuesday. The Giants confirmed that Garrett had been relieved of his duties as offensive coordinator in the wake of Monday's 30-10 defeat in Tampa. The 55-year-old joined the Giants in 2020 after his contract as head coach of the Dallas Cowboys expired at the end of the 2019 season. The Giants are currently bottom of the NFC East standings with three wins and seven defeats following Monday's loss to the Bucs. It follows a losing 2020 season where the team finished with a 6-10 record.

## No timeframe on Spurs' success for new boss Conte

LONDON: Tottenham Hotspur boss Antonio Conte has refused to set a timeframe for ending the north London club's long wait for silverware as he insisted trophies were the "target". Europe's new third-tier Conference League, where Spurs travel to Slovenia for a tie with NS Mura tonight, may offer the best hope of ending a trophy drought dating back to a 2008 English League Cup triumph. But recently-appointed Spurs head coach Conte, who guided London rivals Chelsea to the 2016/17 Premier League title and 2018 FA Cup, is well aware of the scale of the challenge.

"I know this is not simple, I am honest to understand this, but we want to try and build something important and try and lift trophies together, this must be our target," he told a pre-match press conference yesterday. The 52-year-old Italian added: "To build something ready to fight, in England it is not easy because



LONDON: Tottenham Hotspur's Italian head coach Antonio Conte gestures on the touchline during the English Premier League football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Leeds United at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London, on November 21, 2021. — AFP

the other teams are very, very strong but I know that through the work we can improve a lot. If you ask me how much time we need before it happens, it is very difficult to tell you this. In our heart and mind, this must be our

inspiration and we are to try to do this for the best of the club."

Conte's predecessor, Nuno Espirito Santo left his entire first-choice starting XI at home for the game away to Vitesse Arnhem last

## 'Duracell bunny' Haraguchi eager to break Union duck

BERLIN: Dubbed 'Duracell bunny' for his seemingly tireless energy, Genki Haraguchi is a shoe-in for Union Berlin this season, but the Japan midfielder is desperate to break his duck for the Bundesliga club. "I want to score," the 30-year-old attacking midfielder told reporters having yet to hit the net in 19 games since his off-season transfer from second-tier Hanover.

Haraguchi's silky passing has helped Union's strikers Max Kruse and Taiwo Awoniyi bag 16 goals between them this season, but he wants to get on the scoresheet. "I want to make the difference in games. I am generally happy with my form this season, but I want to score goals," he said.

It seems to be just a matter of time. The Japan veteran showed his finishing prowess at Hanover last season by having a hand in 16 goals — scoring nine and creating seven more — which earned him a free transfer to Union. "He's one of the winners of the season so far," Union's CEO Oliver Ruhnert told Kicker. "He's a bit like the Duracell bunny — he always gives his all."

Haraguchi came close to scoring against former club Hertha Berlin in Saturday's 2-0 derby win which saw Union climb to fifth in Germany's top

flight. He made key contributions by creating goals in wins over Moenchengladbach and Wolfsburg, a home defeat to Bayern Munich and draw with Cologne.

He'd love to hit the net tonight at Maccabi Haifa in the Europa Conference League, where Union need another win, having beaten the Zionist entity's champions 3-0 in Berlin, to climb off the bottom of their group. "It's a big goal for us to reach the next round, but we have to win the last two games," said Haraguchi.

### Midfield switch

After failing to make an impact in four years at Hertha, Haraguchi was loaned to Fortuna Dusseldorf, who he helped win promotion in 2018 before being sold to Hanover. There he rebooted his career by switching from the wing to attacking midfield, which yielded 15 goals and 16 assists in the last three full seasons.

"I was a typical winger, but now I play more in the middle, it suits me better," he said. "Being on the wing is a lot of one-on-one, but playing in the middle means you have to be more flexible. That is one of my strengths."

Haraguchi's boundless energy has been fully tested this season on international duty with Japan. In mid-November, he flew from Germany to

month in order to ensure they were available for a Premier League match at West Ham. Spurs lost both matches, however.

Conte said he would take his strongest available squad to Slovenia for a game against the Conference League's lowest-ranked team after launching his Tottenham reign with last weekend's 2-1 win over Leeds in the Premier League.

"All the players available will come with us," he added. "They must be ready to play against Mura. "I said on Sunday that I need to make rotation because there are players that are a bit tired because they played many games with the national team and also we worked a lot in the last two weeks. There are other players that need game time. For us this competition is important. We want to take this fixture seriously and we want to go through to the next step".

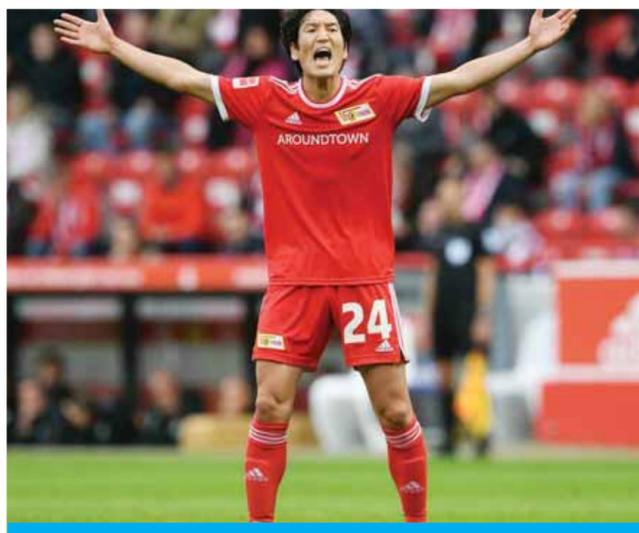
Tottenham, who have 11 games before the end of the year, will be without Cristian Romero. The defender suffered what Conte said was a "serious" hamstring injury playing for Argentina in last week's World Cup qualifier against Brazil. "About Cristian Romero, we're waiting for another scan," Conte said. "Honestly, I think his injury is serious. We have to wait. I don't know the time he needs to recover." — AFP

play just four minutes — two in each game — in wins over Oman and Vietnam to leave Japan second in their World Cup qualifying group.

That came after flying halfway around the world to be on the bench for October's 2-1 win over Australia in Saitama after playing half an hour of a 2-1 defeat away to Saudi Arabia. "I don't like flying, but I am used to it. I have no idea how many kilometers I

have flown this year," said Haraguchi. "It's just football, I am always proud to play for Japan."

Haraguchi scored in Japan's last-gasp 3-2 defeat to Belgium in the last 16 of the 2018 World Cup and is eager for another chance at next year's finals in Qatar. "We're now in second place (four points behind Saudi Arabia), so have a chance of going to the World Cup." — AFP



BERLIN: Union Berlin's Japanese midfielder Genki Haraguchi reacts during the German first division Bundesliga football match between 1 FC Union Berlin and VfL Wolfsburg in Berlin on October 16, 2021. — AFP