

Infantino condemns 'abhorrent' racism in Italy, England



Milan's Mike Maignan (L) talks to referee Fabio Maresca after allegedly being racially abused by Udinese fans in Udine, Italy, on January 20, 2024.
● JENNIFER LORENZINI/REUTERS

AFP – FIFA president Gianni Infantino called for worldwide stadium bans for fans and "automatic forfeits" for teams whose supporters hurl "abhorrent" abuse following racist incidents in Italy and England on Saturday.

"The events that took place in Udine and Sheffield on Saturday are totally abhorrent and completely unacceptable," he said in a statement.

Fans aimed monkey chants at AC Milan and France goalkeeper Mike Maignan during Milan's dramatic 3-2 win at Udinese, with the game temporarily halted.

Coventry midfielder Kasey Palmer accused Sheffield Wednesday fans of doing the same towards him during their English Championship clash, which his team won 2-1.

"We need all the relevant stakeholders to take action, starting with education in schools so that future generations understand that this is not part of football or society," Infantino said.

"As well as the three-step process (match stopped, match re-stopped, match abandoned), we have to implement an automatic forfeit for the team whose fans have committed racism and caused the match to be abandoned as well as worldwide stadium bans and criminal charges for racists.

"FIFA and football shows full solidarity to victims of racism and any form of discrimination. Once and for all: No to racism! No to any form of discrimination!"

At Udinese, referee Fabio Maresca stopped play during the first half and a livid Maignan stormed down the tunnel with his teammates.

"They're ignorant people... You can be booed or whistled when you're away from home, that's normal, but what happened today has no place in football," Maignan told Sky Sports. Play resumed after about five minutes.

Italy, a country governed by a coalition led by the far-right Brothers of Italy party, is rife with fascist football fan groups, in particular among the hardcore "ultras" who make most of the atmosphere at stadiums.

Last week Lazio were hit with a one-match stand closure after supporters directed monkey chants at Romelu Lukaku during their team's Italian Cup win over local rivals Roma.

Persepolis racing against the clock to name new manager

Sports Desk

When Persepolis rounded off a sensational season with a domestic double back in May, thanks to a derby victory over archrival Esteghlal in the Hazfi Cup final, no one in the Reds camp thought the following campaign would be dominated by the biggest turmoil for the club in years.

Less than eight months on, however, rumors and speculations keep swirling around the Persepolis bench as the club's search for Yahya Golmohammadi's successor drags on.

Having steered his team to three league crowns and an AFC Champions League final in four years, the decorated manager stepped down from his role on the first day of the new year following a run of only three wins in 12 outings – which saw Persepolis crash out of the Asian elite clubs' competition group stage – to put a lid on months of rift with chairman Reza Darvish.

Few of the Reds faithful rued Golmohammadi's departure after a familiar face in Branko Ivanekovich – widely regarded as the linchpin of the team's domestic success over the past seven years – was named as the leading candidate to make a dramatic return to the dugout, but the Oman head coach – also a three-time league champion and an ACL finalist with Persepolis – turned down the offer due to "family and personal" reasons.

With the club confirming that the next manager will come from overseas, several names have been brought up in the media to save the Reds' season and perhaps em-



● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

bark on another glorious chapter for the team.

An assistant to Carlos Queiroz in Real Madrid and the former manager of Porto and Sporting CP in his home country, Portuguese José Peseiro has been among the rumored candidates in recent days. Peseiro is no stranger to Asian football as he is also an ex-coach of a number of clubs in the Middle East, including Al Hilal, Shar-

jah, and Al Wahda, while he was in charge during Saudi Arabia's ill-fated 2010 World Cup qualification, though he led his team to a first, and only to date, victory over regional rival Iran in Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

The Portuguese, however, is unlikely to return to the Iranian capital's iconic venue as he is committed to a contract with Nigeria at the ongoing Africa Cup

of Nations, where his team is second in Group A.

Gianni De Biasi has also been linked to the job but his unimpressive CV might be against the 67-year-old Italian being given the role.

Having had mediocre spells at Serie A clubs Torino and Udinese as well as LaLiga sides Alaves and Levante, the former coach of the Albania national team was last in

charge of Azerbaijan, before being sacked last November following a run of 10 wins in 39 matches.

With the Iranian top-flight resumption right around the corner – once Iran's Asian Cup campaign comes to an end – and Golmohammadi's Brazilian No.2 Osmar Loss Vieira acting as a caretaker in the training sessions, Darvish will be desperate to appoint the new boss in the coming days.

Australian Open 2024:

Ruthless Djokovic, Sinner cruise into quarter-finals

BBC – Top seed Novak Djokovic moved ominously into the Australian Open quarter-finals with a ruthless thrashing of French 20th seed Adrian Mannarino.

Djokovic, chasing a record 25th Grand Slam title, claimed a dominant 6-0 6-0 6-3 win in one hour and 44 minutes.

"The first two sets were the best I have played in a while," Djokovic said.

The 36-year-old will face 12th seed Taylor Fritz in the quarter-finals after the American beat last year's finalist Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Later on Sunday, Italy's Jannik Sinner secured his last-eight spot with a 6-4 7-5 6-3 win over world number 15 Karen Khachanov.

Sinner is one of the favorites to challenge Djokovic in Melbourne. Until Mannarino won the second game of the third set, Djokovic was on course to be the first player to win all three sets without dropping a game at a Grand Slam since 1993 – a feat never achieved at the Australian Open.

When Mannarino did clinch the game, the Rod Laver Arena crowd cheered wildly and the Frenchman broke into a huge smile.

"I really wanted to lose that game because the tension was building up in the stadium," Djokovic joked afterwards.

"I needed to get that one out of the way so I could refocus on what I needed to do to close out the match. I played great from the first to the last point."

An 11th title in Melbourne would take Djokovic clear of Margaret Court's all-time record number of 24 Grand Slam wins.

Djokovic had dropped sets in the first two rounds and said he was struggling with an illness but found form against Tomas Martin Etcheverry in the third round.

Can anyone stop Djokovic?

Fourth seed Sinner continued to underline his title contender credentials as he came through a tough test against Russia's Khachanov.

Sinner was far from his best but managed to survive nine break points and hit 46 winners to come out on top after two hours and 34 minutes on Margaret Court Arena. "Usually when we play it's a tough match, he's [Khachanov] an incredible player, I tried to stay focused, mentally and physically," Sinner said.

"Every match has its own story. Today I won so I'm very happy. We have quite a similar game style, so it's a kind of ping-pong. I tried to mix it up a bit today."

The 22-year-old, who is yet to drop a set in the tournament, is

on course to meet Djokovic in the semi-finals.

Sinner won four titles in 2023 and ended it on a high by leading Italy to a first Davis Cup title for 47 years.

He defeated Djokovic twice in the space of 10 days in 2023 – in the ATP Finals round-robin and Davis Cup semi-finals.

However, Djokovic did claim a dominant victory over Sinner in the final in Turin to win a record seventh ATP Finals title.

Up next for Djokovic is Fritz, who beat Greek seventh seed Tsitsipas 7-6 (7-2) 5-7 6-3 6-3 to reach his first Australian Open quarter-final. Fritz and Djokovic met in the third round of the 2021 Australian Open, with the Serb winning in five sets. Djokovic has won all eight of their previous matches, including a straight-set victory at the 2023 US Open.

When asked in his news conference about an answer Djokovic gave about the possibility of playing Fritz, the American said: "If I beat someone eight times in a row, I'd be pretty confident playing them, too. I can't really fault him for that."

"I think that I have a lot more level to bring than I've previously brought against him. Hopefully I can play another match like today."



Novak Djokovic serves against Adrian Mannarino during their fourth-round Australian Open match at Rod Laver Arena, Melbourne, Australia, on January 21, 2024.
● ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP