

A Champions League match may have triggered the Covid-19 outbreak

REPORTS SUGGEST that a Round of 16 game at the San Siro is where the coronavirus multiplied and spread in Italy and Spain as fans thronged the San Siro, making the two countries Europe's Covid-19 hotspot.

THE EVENT

On February 19, more than 40,000 Bergamo residents – a city north-east of Milan – went to San Siro to watch their home team Atalanta play a Champions League round of 16 fixture against Spain's Valencia. Atalanta's 4-1 first-leg victory triggered wild celebrations inside the stadium as also outside, in Milan and Bergamo. Fans hugged each other in a packed stadium.

THE CONSEQUENCE

A few weeks later, Bergamo became the hardest-hit town in Italy's hardest-hit region, Lombardy. Two days ago, the number of coronavirus cases in Lombardy jumped

by 2,500. As *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported: "The spread of the novel coronavirus has swelled the daily obituary section in Bergamo's local newspaper from two or three pages to as much as 10 or 11. Intensive care units there don't have nearly enough beds, and Italian soldiers are being deployed to move coffins from Bergamo's overwhelmed morgues."

Bergamo's mayor Giorgio Gori later admitted that the football match did a serious damage. "It's clear that evening was a situation in which the virus was widely spread," he told *AFP*, while *AP* quoted him as saying: "Unfortunately, we couldn't have known. No one knew the virus was already here."

TRANSMITTING IT TO SPAIN

It could well be a case that a few thousands away fans who were present at San Siro that day unknowingly got in touch with several coronavirus carriers. So when they returned to Spain, they took the



The first leg of Atalanta's Champions League clash with Valencia was played in front of a packed house at the San Siro. AP

novel virus with them. The return-leg fixture between Valencia and Atalanta was played behind closed doors at Mestalla Stadium on March 10. But by then, the

damage was done. According to reports, six days after the return-leg match, Valencia announced that 35 per cent of their starters tested positive for coron-

avirus. Atalanta's goalkeeper Marco Sportiello became the club's first player to contact coronavirus. So far, Spain has recorded more than 64,000 positive coronavirus cases and over 4,500 deaths.

ITALY'S CORONAVIRUS TIMELINE

Italy's coronavirus timeline shows how positive cases have risen exponentially after the football match. On January 31, the Italian government suspended flights to China after two positive coronavirus cases in Rome. On February 20, a day after the Champions League match, a man was tested positive in Lombardy. He had been to the hospital previously but left without a test. It is believed that he spread the virus widely before developing severe symptoms.

On February 23, some towns in Lombardy were placed under quarantine. Some football matches were cancelled. On March 4, the number of positive cases rose to 3,089. A week later, the number in-

creased to 12,462. On March 22, when almost the whole of Italy went into a total lockdown, the number of Covid-19 cases had jumped to 59,138.

THE NEGLIGENCE

On the face of it, Italy initially looked at the threat as a problem exported from China and assumed that cancellation of flights to and from China would solve the problem. They allowed football matches, carnivals and fanfare to continue till the first week of March. Only on March 9, the authorities suspended Serie A and B following a government decree from Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

"Italy looked at the example of China, not as a practical warning, but as a science fiction movie that had nothing to do with us. And when the virus exploded, Europe looked at us the same way we looked at China," Sandra Zampa, undersecretary of Italy's Health Ministry was quoted as saying by *The New York Times*. **ENS**

FIFA's bailout plan

Football's global governing body works towards providing a new framework to help clubs survive shutdown

TARIQ PANJA
MARCH 27

WITH FOOTBALL'S global calendar upended by the coronavirus, FIFA is scrambling to draft new regulations for player contracts and transactions between clubs in an effort to create a road map out of the sport's unprecedented shutdown. Lawyers at FIFA's Zurich headquarters have huddled (virtually) with representatives from leagues, clubs and players unions to provide a framework to deal with the cascading issues created by the pandemic.

With leagues across the world idle – many nearing the end of their seasons – and thousands of athletes at home, unable to practice, clubs are increasingly concerned about their financial futures.

Many of them have implemented patchwork measures on their own to try to mitigate the effects of the stoppage. Now FIFA is trying to come up with a plan to deal with the aftermath of the frozen seasons and the eventual restart of football and all the business that goes along with it. Estimates for the costs of the shutdown vary widely, but industry leaders are bracing for an enormous impact. Andrea Agnelli, the head of Europe's trade body for clubs, told his members they were facing "the biggest challenge the game and our industry has ever faced."

In a confidential document, a copy of which was reviewed by *The New York Times*, named "Covid-19: Football Regulatory issues," a special working group from FIFA has laid out the most pressing issues. Its main focus is on player contracts and transfer windows – periods when clubs can buy and sell players. There are typically two windows, one in the middle of the season and the other in post-season. But with no certainty as to when the current seasons will end, FIFA has proposed that clubs extend the contracts of players whose agreements were to expire this summer until the seasons can be finished. It also suggested that players who were to join new clubs as free agents continue with their current clubs until the end of the seasons.

The proposals, which are an attempt to balance the needs of the clubs and of the players, also address a glaring issue: how to compensate club employees when the means of income for many teams, particularly smaller ones that derive more revenue from stadium receipts than from broadcast contracts, have diminished – almost completely, in some cases. "It is clear that the Covid-19 virus outbreak has frustrated football employment agreements on a global basis," FIFA's document said. "The obligations placed on both parties are made impossible – players and coaches are unable to work; clubs are unable to provide work, nor are they in a position to compensate employees for work not provided."

Without any central guidance yet, clubs have come up with a wide range of solutions for themselves. Some have already struck amicable agreements with their players to reduce salary payments.

At Leeds United, a second-tier English club that was poised to clinch promotion to the Premier League when play was suspended, players agreed to a salary deferral for an indefinite period so other employees at the club could continue to be paid.

In France's top division, Lyon and Marseille used French law to put their players into a form of technical unemployment, in order for the state to contribute part of their salaries. Some of the biggest clubs are also feeling the pinch. Barcelona announced on Thursday that it was temporarily cutting salaries club-wide, including those of players and staff, but did not provide specific figures.

In some cases, relations between clubs and players have soured. In Switzerland, F.C. Sion fired nine players after they refused a pay cut; the players' union in Colombia on Wednesday issued a furious comment after Independiente Santa Fe posted a Twitter poll asking its fans to vote on whether or not the team's players should have their salaries reduced.

In some countries, including Croatia, Cyprus, Israel and Malta, clubs unilaterally made pay cuts within the first days of the shutdown. With such variances, FIFA has tried to provide a framework for the negotiations, start-



FIFA's most direct initiative is a suggestion that it could dip into its own cash reserves to help pay salaries to players suddenly left without an income. Reuters

THE FIFA FILES

A FIFA document titled "Covid-19: Football Regulatory issues," has underlined some of the game's most pressing issues. They are:

TRANSFER WINDOW: With the uncertainty prevailing over when the current seasons will end, FIFA has proposed that clubs extend the contracts of players and suggested those who were to join new clubs as free agents continue with their current clubs till the end of the season.

COMPENSATION TO CLUBS: FIFA is looking to work out a formula to compensate clubs, particularly the smaller ones that derive bulk of their revenues from stadium receipts rather than broadcast contracts, both of which have diminished completely because of the current pandemic.

It is clear that the Covid-19 outbreak has frustrated football employment agreements on a global basis... the obligations placed on both parties are made impossible – players and coaches are unable to work; clubs are unable to provide work, nor are they in a position to compensate employees for work not provided."

THE FIFA DOCUMENT

ing with a recommendation that clubs and their players come to an agreement to defer or reduce salary while no football is being played. FIFA also proposed that clubs look at the option of furloughing players, "provided adequate alternative income support arrangements can be found for employees during the period in

question." This could be the case in countries like Britain, where the government has agreed to pay up to 80 per cent of an employee's salary if the employer is unable to operate.

FIFA's most direct initiative, though, is a suggestion that it could dip into its own cash reserves to help pay salaries for players suddenly left without an income. FIFA has also anticipated the chaos the current suspension will wreak on the annual \$7 billion player trading window. Discussions that sometimes take months have been squeezed into days, as an urgent plan to change the contours of the global transfer windows has quickly come together.

Pressing concerns

Perhaps the most pressing concern for FIFA is Europe's summer trading window, which had been set to open in some of Europe's biggest leagues as early as May. That is now impossible, given that the current season cannot be completed by then.

FIFA said it would not put a deadline on any league to finish the current season and would also approve any requests to change the dates of the transfer window. Teams could carry out transactions for as long as 16 weeks, FIFA said, four weeks longer than the previous maximum for a window. A working group led by Victor Montagliani, a FIFA vice president, discussed the matters Thursday, though no final decisions were made.

The head-spinning nature of events brought on by the novel coronavirus has led to a rare period of collaboration among soccer's biggest leagues, clubs and governing bodies to find a solution. That was made clear in a letter sent to members of the European Club Association, an umbrella group for around 200 top-division teams.

It was written by Agnelli, the organization's chairman who is also president of the Italian club Juventus. Agnelli described the current standstill as "a real existential threat." He laid out two key objectives for his group: First was defining strategies to get players back on the field safely. That emphasis suggested a desire to play games without spectators at first, probably for a lengthy period. The group's second focus, Agnelli said, was coordinating efforts to "help manage club financials in this time of social and economic crisis." **NYT**

Virus fallout: Salary cuts and pink slips on the cards

BARCELONA TO TRIM SALARIES

Barcelona said they were slashing salaries to counter the financial fall-out from the coronavirus although the Spanish giants did not specify if all of its employees would be affected by the move. All football has been suspended in Spain where the virus has so far killed more than 4,000 people with 56,000 confirmed cases. "The suspension of competitions, following the epidemic of Covid-19, entails the cessation of all activities, sporting and non-sporting, of our club," said a statement released by Barcelona. The club, it added, had taken a "series of measures to mitigate its effects and reduce the economic consequences of this crisis." "Essentially, it is a reduction in the working day, forced by the circumstances, and consequently a proportional reduction in the remuneration provided for in the respective contracts." They did not specify the scale of the cuts.

ESPANYOL REQUEST 70% PAY CUT

Espanyol have asked labour authorities in Catalonia to allow them to cut player and staff salaries by 70 percent while football is suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, the La Liga club said Friday. The Barcelona-based outfit, who are bottom of La Liga, are among a raft of clubs set to take a huge financial hit due to the suspension of football in Spain, one of the countries worst hit by COVID-19. "Due to the temporary suspension of the season, Espanyol have presented a plan of partial unemployment," the club said. "The requested measure consists of a 70 percent reduction in working hours." Espanyol said that the proposed reduction regards players and coaching staff from the men's and women's first teams, Espanyol B and youth teams, and was made "unilaterally

for reasons of urgency".

LAYOFFS BY AUSTRALIA FEDERATION

Australia's soccer federation laid off most of its staff on Friday as domestic sports battled to stay afloat during the national lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus. A round of layoffs also hit domestic cricket while the National Rugby League, scrapped a slew of national and state tournaments. Football Federation Australia (FFA), three days after suspending the top-flight A-League indefinitely, said it had let go 70% of its staff in a bid to keep the embattled code afloat. "This has been an extremely difficult decision to make, but necessary to stabilise the organisation so that it can continue to service the game, albeit in a vastly different landscape," FFA Chief Executive James Johnson said.

UNITED TO OFFER REFUNDS

Manchester United will refund supporters if they have to play their remaining home games of the season behind closed doors or if they are scrapped due to the coronavirus pandemic. The deadline for season ticket renewals for next season has also been suspended, with no indication as to when the current campaign can restart. English football has been suspended until April 30, but a meeting of Premier League clubs next week is expected to push that date further back. United would be one of the clubs worst affected should the 2019/20 season fail to be completed as they sit fifth in the Premier League, outside the Champions League places, and are still involved in the latter stages of the Europa League and FA Cup. "The club supports the collective intent to complete the Premier League, FA Cup and the UEFA club competitions," United said.

COMPILED FROM AGENCIES

Athletes qualified for Tokyo 2020 will keep spots for 2021

AFP/REUTERS
PARIS, MARCH 27

ATHLETES WHO had already qualified for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics before they were postponed will keep their places when the showpiece takes place in 2021, sources told the AFP.

Around 57 per cent of the 11,000 scheduled participants for Tokyo had already made sure of taking part when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) pushed the Games back to 2021 due to the coronavirus on Tuesday. The IOC and 32 international sports federations held a teleconference on Thursday where it was decided to respect the qualification process.

"Thomas Bach (the IOC President) first explained the reasons for the postponement of the Games, then said that the athletes qualified for Tokyo 2020 would automatically be qualified for 2021," one of the participants in the conference told AFP.

"One of the main subjects was to know when and how to organise the qualifications. "In some federations, many sportsmen and sportswomen are not qualified and it takes at least three months for the Olympic Games to organise them." The 2020 Tokyo Games were scheduled for July 24-August 9, but after telephone discussions between Bach and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a historic joint decision was taken for the first postponement of an Olympics in peacetime.

However, there is no definite date yet for the rescheduled Games with Bach saying Tuesday the Tokyo Olympics "must be rescheduled to a date beyond 2020 but not later than summer 2021, to safeguard the health of the athletes, everybody involved in the Olympic Games and the international community". Many Olympic sports, such as boxing, saw the vast majority of their qualifying tournaments either interrupted or cancelled due to the global health situation. Others, such as sailing however, already had 90 per cent of their competitors qualified. "The allocated quotas remain allocated," confirmed another participant in Thursday's meeting.

"Thomas Bach has confirmed that a decision (on a new date for the 2021 event) will be made within the next four weeks," he said. "Some said they prefer May 2021, others June." Some federation chiefs also expressed financial concerns, claiming in advance part of the sums traditionally allocated after the Olympic Games by the IOC to the governing bodies.

'Canada's withdrawal unilateral'

Canada's decision to withdraw from the Tokyo Olympic Games if they were to be held in 2020 was a unilateral decision based on the health and safety of athletes and with no consultation with the International Olympic Committee, the COC said on Friday. The Canadian Olympic Committee and the Canadian Paralympic Committee had said on Sunday they would not be sending athletes to Tokyo in July if the IOC decided to go ahead with the plans to stage Games this year amid the coronavirus outbreak.

"While we are, and have been, in constant communication with the IOC, our decision last Sunday evening to not send athletes to Tokyo this summer because of COVID-19 concerns was taken solely by the Canadian Olympic Committee without the participation of the IOC," COC spokesperson Photi Sotiropoulos told Reuters in a telephone call.

"The decision was taken in consultation with our athletes' commission, our Chief Medical Officer and the Canadian sport community... We met with our athletes' commission... twice before making our decision with the full support of over 100 members of our sport community and the Canadian Olympic Board," Sotiropoulos added.