

# Iranian Teams' Withdrawal Will Damage the Competition's Reputation: Forbes



TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) sent a letter to Iran's football federation saying the Iranian teams would not be hosting AFC Champions League matches for security reasons, a move that would be damaging to the AFC Champions League's reputation, Steve Price wrote in Forbes.

The AFC has reportedly banned Iran from hosting international matches based on safety fears over the current tensions in the region. Iranian club sides have responded by planning to withdraw from the

AFC Asian Champions League. The clubs have said Iran is "safe", while Iranian media and fans have said politics, rather than security, is behind the AFC's decision, he wrote.

Iran are one of the top nations in the Asian Champions League, and have some of the best supported clubs in Asia. Iranian clubs had a poor campaign last year, but the year before that, Persepolis reached the final of the competition. They, along with Esteghlal, Sepahan and Shahr Khodro, will withdraw from

the competition should the AFC's fixture ban not be reversed.

Iranian sides played their matches against Saudi Arabian sides on neutral territory last season, so the move by the AFC isn't completely unprecedented. But playing any games on neutral territory is damaging to the competition's reputation. When over 40,000 people turn up in Tehran to watch Esteghlal or Persepolis, it's a much better advert for the Asian Champions League than when a thousand fans turn up in Doha to watch Esteghlal's 'home' match against Al-Hilal.

The absence of Iranian clubs in the competition would be similar to Italian clubs deciding to boycott the UEFA Champions League. Few other Asian countries can match Iran's top clubs in terms of fans. The Asian Champions League is struggling to grow, with low attendances and regular scandals or other embarrassments, so having one of its most important members boycott the competition is the last thing the AFC needs.

But as well as damaging Asia's main club competition, the current

tensions could also damage the United Arab Emirates' and Qatar's attempts to bolster their sporting credentials.

The UAE and Qatar have benefited in the past from their relative stability compared to other countries in the region, often hosting ties that can't be played at the home country's stadium for security reasons. If Iran is banned from hosting international matches, then it is possible that Iran's 'home' games would be played in the UAE or Qatar.

But it seems the current tensions in the Middle East have finally caught up with Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha, as other soccer teams are staying away.

The USA men's soccer team cancelled its camp in Doha earlier this month due to the "developing situation in the region", holding it in Florida instead. And last week Manchester United scrapped plans for a training trip to the Middle East in February, while Arsenal have said they are assessing security measures before deciding whether to head to Dubai for warm weather training.

## Aldridge, DeRozan Help Spurs Beat Heat 107-102



San Antonio Spurs' DeMar DeRozan, right, drives against Miami Heat's Derrick Jones, Jr. during the second half of an NBA basketball game, Sunday, Jan. 19, 2020, in San Antonio.

SAN ANTONIO (AP) -- Patty Mills celebrated his heritage Sunday with a performance that typified his career.

Mills provided a late spark, LaMarcus Aldridge scored 21 points and the San Antonio Spurs held off the Miami Heat 107-102 Sunday.

The win came as San Antonio became the first NBA team to hold Indigenous People Night - a meaningful cause to Mills, who is an Australian of aboriginal descent.

Mills had 18 points and DeMar DeRozan added 20 as San Antonio snapped a two-game skid.

Mills requested the Spurs honor his ancestry as well as those of Native Americans, and the franchise obliged on the eve of Martin Luther King Day.

Miami's Duncan Robinson missed a 3-pointer with 10.2 seconds left and the Heat trailing 105-102. Miami fouled Marco Belinelli, who made both free throws to cap the scoring.

Bam Adebayo had 21 points, 16

rebounds and six assists for Miami, which had won its previous two games. Goran Dragic added 19 points and Kendrick Nunn had 18.

"I actually liked the way we competed," said Heat forward Jimmy Butler, who had 16 points.

The Spurs rebounded - barely - after blowing a 14-point lead in the fourth quarter against Atlanta in a 121-120 defeat Friday.

Mills fueled a late run by diving out of bounds and throwing the ball off Miami center Meyers Leonard to salvage an offensive possession. With cheers of "Patty, Patty," still ringing throughout the AT&T Center, Aldridge drained a hook shot to pull the Spurs within 98-97 with 4:39 remaining.

A few possessions later, Derrick White used a backhanded stab to deflect and steal an attempted entry pass at the top of the key by Adebayo. That led to a three-point play by Aldridge for a 102-98 lead with 3:20 remaining.

## Gauff Beats Williams at Grand Slam Again



BRISBANE (Dispatches) -

American 15-year-old Coco Gauff proved last year's victory over Venus Williams was no fluke when she beat the seven-time Grand Slam champion once again to reach the Australian Open second round. Gauff announced her arrival last July with victory over her "idol" Williams, 39, in the Wimbledon first round.

And just like last time, she did it in straight sets, winning 7-6 (7-5)

6-3. Gauff's celebrations were slightly delayed because she did not realise the final point had been given her way.

"That was really difficult. She played really well and I was really nervous for today's match - I was a bit shocked when I saw the draw, but glad I was able to get through it," said Gauff, who was making her Australian Open debut.

## Ronaldo Nets 2, Juve Beat Parma to Go 4 Points Clear at Top

MILAN (AP) -- Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as Juventus beat Parma 2-1 on Sunday to remain firmly on course for a record-extending ninth straight Serie A title.

Juventus moved four points above Inter Milan, which was held 1-1 at relegation-threatened Lecce earlier. Lazio is six points behind Juve but with a game in hand.

Ronaldo's brace took his tally to 432 goals in Europe's top five leagues, one behind all-time record-holder Lionel Messi, who scored for Barcelona on Sunday.

"What was important was to win tonight," Ronaldo said. "Lazio won, Inter drew and we couldn't allow ourselves not to make the most of that important advantage."

Ronaldo's first goal was thanks to a stroke of luck as his effort took a deflection off Parma defender Matteo Darmian to wrongfoot goalkeeper Luigi Sepe, two minutes from halftime.

Andreas Cornelius headed in a corner to draw Parma level in the 55th but Juventus restored its lead just three minutes later.

## Salah Strikes as Liverpool Stroll On

LIVERPOOL, England (AP) -- Mohamed Salah ripped off his Liverpool jersey at a freezing Anfield after completing a 2-0 victory over Manchester United in stoppage time on Sunday, rousing fans on the Kop to sing: "We're gonna win the league."

It's been a 30-year wait but there is no longer any trepidation from the Liverpool supporters as their team has moved 16 points in front at the Premier League summit.

"Now you're gonna believe us," they chanted.

It took Salah getting on the end of goalkeeper Alisson's inspired long ball with the final whistle about to blow for the Liverpool title party to begin with four months of the season remaining.

Although Liverpool only held a slender lead heading into stoppage time - after Virgil van Dijk's 14th minute header from Trent Alexander-Arnold's corner - the ineffective United attack meant



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah, centre, celebrates after scoring his side's second goal during the English Premier League soccer match between Liverpool and Manchester United at Anfield Stadium in Liverpool, Sunday, Jan. 19, 2020.

this victory never appeared in doubt.

Even with Liverpool unbeaten through 22 rounds and with a game in hand, the players aren't as bullish as their fans in declaring the title a done deal.

Liverpool could even afford to have two goals ruled out, including Roberto Firmino's curling strike due to Van Dijk's foul on United goalkeeper David de Gea in the buildup. Salah also scuffed a shot and captain Jordan Hender-

son hit the post.

Liverpool is closing in on a 19th English title, one behind the record haul United built with 13 Premier League successes under Alex Ferguson.

But it is United's neighbor Manchester City that is the nearest but still distant challenger to Liverpool, 16 points behind in second place in its ailing title defense.

United is 30 points behind Liverpool in fifth place.

"They had moments when they played football," Klopp said of United. "But it's not too often."

Ole Gunnar Solskjær couldn't fault his United players despite struggling to impose themselves on the leaders.

"The players have given absolutely everything they've got," the United manager said. "Commitment is no issue at all."

Just closing the five-point gap on the fourth Champions League place is the mission for United.

## Setien Gets First Win With Barca After Late Messi Goal

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) -- Quique Setien had Lionel Messi to thank for ensuring he made a winning start as Barcelona's new coach.

The club's all-time leading scorer finally broke down a stubborn Granada after the visitors were reduced to 10 men to secure a 1-0 win at Camp Nou on Sunday.

Granada had kept Barcelona in check and hit the post in its best scoring chance moments before Germán Sánchez was sent off with 20 minutes to play after getting a second yellow card for fouling Messi.

A hole then appeared in the visitors' defense which Messi exploited by passing to Antoine Griezmann inside the area.

Griezmann quickly squared the ball for Arturo Vidal, who used his heel to roll it on for Messi to slot into the corner of the net for the 76th-minute winner.

Setien, who last coached at Real Betis, was hired by Barcelona on Monday after it fired Ernesto Valverde following a loss in the Spanish Super Cup semifinal to Atlético Madrid.

"I am happy. ... We did many things well and I hope to go forward improving little by little," Setien said.

Barcelona stayed ahead of Real Madrid on goal difference. Both teams are eight points ahead of third-place Atlético Madrid after 20 of 38 rounds.

Messi took his league-leading



Barcelona's head coach Quique Setien kicks the ball back to the pitch during a Spanish La Liga soccer match between Barcelona and Granada at Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona, Spain, Sunday, Jan. 19, 2020.

tally to 14 goals this campaign.

With Barcelona at the top of the league, the rare midseason coaching change was seen by many fans as an attempt to recover the attractive passing at-

tack that had waned in recent seasons. Setien declares himself an admirer of soccer great Johan Cruyff, who established Barcelona's style as a coach in the 1990s.