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Kadyrov Outshines All-Star Team

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Kadyrov, left, and his team beat the visitors led by Maradona, right, 5-2. **Eduard Korniyenko**

GROZNY — Diego Maradona took to the field to captain a team of retired superstars in a ceremonial match to mark the opening of a new stadium in Grozny, the latest effort by local authorities to show Chechnya is flourishing.

The 50-year-old Argentine football icon was joined by Luis Figo, Steve McManaman, Franco Baresi and other stars for the game. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov featured on the opposing team of local officials and players at the match, played in the new stadium dedicated to Kadyrov's father and predecessor, who was assassinated in 2004.

On Wednesday night, the hosts ran out 5-2 winners in an often comical match that featured out-of-shape players and sportingly inept officials. The thousands of local fans who turned out in the rain were treated to one moment of Maradona magic, however, when the 1986 World Cup winner knocked in a free kick from the edge of the area.

Local team Terek Grozny, which is coached by Dutch great Ruud Gullit, will be using the new venue for their home games in future.

"We're glad that in Chechnya highly modern structures like this stadium are being constructed," said Terek's club president Kadyrov in a speech before the game.

"The republic is being reborn, we are on the right path," he said as fans cheered at the 30,000-capacity stadium, which was rebuilt at a cost of at least 7 billion rubles ($253.6 million).

Kadyrov raised his arms to salute the crowd as they chanted his name throughout the match.

In March, members of Brazil's 2002 and 1994 World Cup-winning teams, including Romario, also played an exhibition match in Grozny.

Officials have denied paying players to attend, but observers struggle to otherwise explain the willingness of so many of the world's greatest football names to show up in a part of the world seldom associated with the game.

Their appearance has the double advantage of demonstrating Chechnya's worthiness as a venue to showcase such talent, as well as raising Russia's footballing prestige ahead of the World Cup, which it will host for the first time in 2018. Grozny is not on the list of 13 potential World Cup host cities, although local officials including Kadyrov are thought to be keen on changing that. The Akhmad Kadyrov stadium conforms to FIFA standards and could be a World Cup venue if it increases capacity using temporary stands.

Banners bearing the slogan "Russia-2018" were draped around the tribunes on Wednesday night.

Local media have reported that Wednesday's match was organized by a company belonging to a prominent Chechen businessman with considerable oil and construction assets. Switzerland-based Bulat Chagayev recently completed the takeover of Swiss top-flight team Neuchatel Xamax.

(AP, Reuters)

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