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FIFA Says 2018 World Cup Final Arena 'Ahead of Schedule'

By The Moscow Times

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Head of FIFA inspection committee Christian Unger (C) talks to the media as he inspects the Luzhniki Stadium, which is under construction, in Moscow, Oct. 20.

Russia is avoiding Brazil's mistakes.

That was the message as FIFA inspectors completed their tour of the arenas that Russia is building for the 2018 World Cup — no delays here.

While Brazil's World Cup passed off largely smoothly, its buildup was dominated by the rushed finish to stadium construction and, even during the tournament itself, some stadiums were still unfinished and forced to deploy temporary seating and facilities.

In Russia, things are different, said Chris Unger, FIFA's top official overseeing Russian preparations, on Monday as he visited Moscow's vast Luzhniki Stadium, which will host the final in 2018.

"As we heard today, they seem to be ahead of schedule [at Luzhniki], which is good for everybody, because the sooner they finish, the sooner we can begin testing," he said.

Earlier on his five-day tour of the stadiums, Unger had said St. Petersburg's new 69,000-seat arena, set to host a 2018 semifinal, was back on track to open in mid-2016 and host Confederations Cup games a year later.

The arena, planned as a new home for Zenit St. Petersburg years before Russia won the right to host the World Cup, is almost six years behind its original opening date, which looked likely to slip back to 2017, when it will hold Confederation Cup games.

Meanwhile, a dispute over whether to keep the roof on Sochi's Fisht Olympic Stadium has been resolved, easing the preparations there. Unger said the inspectors were told the roof would now be removed to create a more orthodox World Cup stadium.

Those reassurances will be music to the ears of Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko, who pledged before parliament in April that Russia's 11 host cities would avoid the "Brazilian scenario" — shorthand for delays, confusion and infrastructure chaos.

While Unger focused Monday on Russia's sporting future, around him were markers of the past. On the other side of the stadium's grounds stood Spartak Moscow fans bearing large funereal bouquets, there to mark the 32nd anniversary of Russia's worst sporting disaster. At least 66 Spartak fans were crushed to death at a 1982 UEFA Cup game, although some unofficial estimates have put the death toll as high as 340.

For the FIFA delegation's visit to Luzhniki, which hosted the 1980 Olympics, journalists were instructed to gather by a large, snow-covered statue of Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, after whom the stadium was originally named.

Unger also defended FIFA's decision to send inspectors to three completed stadiums but not to seven arenas that have barely started construction. Those stadiums, all in Russian provincial cities, will receive "virtual inspections," which Unger insisted would still be rigorous.

"It's not something that we walk away saying: 'Oh, we've seen the plans, now we're satisfied,'" he said. "It's a process. We come back, we see what progress has been made, see if the plans are accurate, we validate."

Russian Sports Minister Mutko has raised concerns about two of the unvisited arenas, in Kaliningrad in the west and in the southern city of Volgograd, saying that costs may rise because of engineering challenges on their sites.

Unger refused to touch on any topics with a political connection, repeatedly refusing to comment on Russia's problems with racism at football matches.

But the head of the organizing committee was more vocal, insisting that Russia will try to "root out" problems among football fans for the 2018 World Cup as the country struggles with hooliganism and racism.

Racism is "a problem that Russia doesn't need" and the 2018 host nation is opposed

to "certain people" who "use football matches for self-expression, not to watch football," Alexei Sorokin told local media.

Russian football has been tarnished by a string of racist incidents this season. On Tuesday, reigning champion CSKA Moscow will host Manchester City for a Champions League game in an empty stadium following numerous cases of racist behavior by fans.

Last month, Dynamo Moscow defender Christopher Samba was banned for two games by the Russian Football Union for raising his middle finger to fans in retaliation for monkey chants that were aimed at him.

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