

Brazilian Soccer Stars Play in Grozny

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Chechen children dancing for Brazilian players including Dunga, background center, at Grozny's airport Tuesday. **Sergey Ponomarev**

GROZNY — Brazilian football stars from years past took the field in Chechnya on Tuesday for a friendly game against a team led by Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, who fired up the packed stadium with shouts of "God is great."

Bebeto, Cafu, Dunga and Romario — all veterans of Brazil's World Cup-winning side in 1994 — were among the players to travel to the blood-soaked republic. Belgian singer Lara Fabian also came to take part in a pre-match concert.

Kadyrov insisted the Brazilians were not being paid but came as a goodwill gesture after he and "some of his friends" helped Brazil recover from flooding. He gave no specifics.

Kadyrov's team included former players from the national teams of the Soviet Union and Russia as well as former German midfielder Lothar Matthaeus, who played in five World Cups and now coaches Bulgaria. The 34-year-old Chechen leader, who lost five to six kilograms in preparation for the game, scored two goals, but his team lost 4-6.

The Grozny football stadium is one of Chechnya's most resonant spots, especially for Kadyrov, whose father was killed there in a terrorist bombing. Having succeeded his father as Chechnya's leader, Kadyrov has used sports in an effort to show that the region is recovering from war.

Before Tuesday's game began, Kadyrov told reporters that he had invited the legendary Brazilian players to Chechnya because he "wanted to show football to our guys." He then turned to face the stands and cried out "Allahu akbar," or "God is great" in Arabic. The fans, who overfilled the 10,000-seat stadium, shouted the same phrase in response.

In addition to organizing Tuesday's high-profile game, Kadyrov has just brought in former Netherlands star Ruud Gullit to take over as coach of the local club, Terek Grozny. The Brazilian players wore Terek's red, green and white scarves as they emerged from Grozny's airport earlier in the day to the cheers of a couple of hundred flag-waving fans.

Sports can be a powerful social glue — an assertion of national pride and a balm to war-bruised psyches — but whether that will work in Chechnya is in doubt. Along with leading the football team, Kadyrov leads a security force that is widely feared and despised.

Rights activists say the atmosphere of fear and intimidation has been extended to efforts to impose strict Islamic rules on women in Chechnya. Headscarves are now required of all female government employees, university students and even young girls in school. Kadyrov on Tuesday shrugged off the rights groups' accusations. He said Chechen women wear headscarves because they are Muslim and also as part of local traditions, while adding that he personally admires women who cover their heads.

"No hairstyle, no color could make such beauty," he told foreign reporters during a late-night news conference that stretched into the early hours of Tuesday.

Kadyrov denied exerting any pressure on those reluctant to adhere to Islamic dress.

"You have seen women in short skirts without headscarves in Grozny," he said with a grin. "If I try to force them [to dress differently], I will be removed tomorrow."

Kadyrov has also defied Russian law by encouraging Chechen men to have more than one wife. He said he has just one wife and loves her, but could take another one some day.

"If I see another woman prettier than her, why would I go somewhere and sin if Islam allows me to marry her?" he said.

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