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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Swiss Open Investigation Into Awarding of FIFA World Cups to Russia, Qatar

By The Moscow Times

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A staff member walks past a logo of soccer's international governing body FIFA at their headquarters in Zurich.

ZURICH — Swiss police arrested some of the most powerful figures in global soccer on Wednesday, announcing a criminal investigation into the awarding of the 2018 World Cup in Russia and 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

In addition to the Swiss criminal probe, at least six football officials and a number of sports media and promotions executives would face extradition to the United States to face corruption charges involving more than $100 million in bribes.

Those arrested did not include Sepp Blatter, the Swiss head of football's multi-billion dollar governing body FIFA, but included several of those just below him in the hierarchy of the wealthiest and most powerful sports body on earth.

The arrests by plain-clothes police were made at dawn at a plush Zurich hotel where FIFA officials are staying ahead of a vote this week where they have been expected to easily anoint Blatter for a fifth term in office.

Swiss prosecutors said they had opened criminal proceedings against unidentified individuals on suspicion of mismanagement and money laundering related to the awarding of rights to host the 2018 World Cup in Qatar and the 2022 World Cup in Russia.

Data and documents were seized from computers at FIFA's Zurich headquarters. A spokeswoman for FIFA declined to comment.

The Swiss Federal Office of Justice (FOJ) did not immediately identify which officials were arrested pending extradition to the United States, but media reports said they included Jeffrey Webb and Eugenio Figueredo, both FIFA vice-presidents.

The officials were suspected by U.S. investigators of having received or paid bribes totaling millions of dollars, the Swiss FOJ said, while the media and promotions executives were accused of paying the kickbacks.

"The US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York is investigating these individuals on suspicion of the acceptance of bribes and kickbacks between the early 1990s and the present day," the statement said.

"The bribery suspects — representatives of sports media and sports promotion firms — are alleged to have been involved in schemes to make payments to the soccer functionaries — delegates of FIFA and other functionaries of FIFA sub-organizations — totaling more than $100 million."

Billions

The international governing body of football collects billions of dollars in revenue, mostly from sponsorship and television rights for World Cups.

It has persistently been dogged by reports of corruption which it says it investigates itself, but until now it has escaped major criminal cases in any country.

In particular, the decision to award the World Cup to Qatar, a tiny desert country with no domestic tradition of soccer, was heavily criticized by football officials in Western countries. FIFA was forced to acknowledge that it is too hot to play soccer there in the summer when the cup is traditionally held, forcing schedules around the globe to be rewritten to move the cup.

FIFA hired a former U.S. prosecutor to examine allegations of bribery over the awarding of the World Cups to Qatar and Russia, but has refused to publish his report, releasing only a summary in which it said there were no major irregularities. The investigator quit, saying his report had been mischaracterized.

More than 10 officials were expected to be indicted but not all were in Zurich. The New York Times said Jack Warner, Eduardo Li, Julio Rocha, Costas Takkas, Rafael Esquivel, José Maria Marin and Nicolas Leoz were among those indicted.

FIFA officials were due to hold a news conference at 09:00 GMT on Wednesday.

Most of the officials are in Switzerland for the FIFA Congress, where Blatter faces a challenge from Jordan's Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein in an election on Friday to lead the organization. Other potential challengers to Blatter have all dropped out the race.

Prince Ali, who has promised to clean up FIFA if elected to the top job, called it "a sad day for football."

The New York Times said more than a dozen Swiss law enforcement officials arrived at Zurich's Baur au Lac hotel early on Wednesday, took keys from the registration desk and headed up to the rooms.

CONCACAF Focus

The Times said much of the U.S. enquiry was focused on the CONCACAF region, which governs soccer in the North America, Central America and the Caribbean.

The confederation's Trinidadian former boss Warner was regularly dogged by accusations of corruption before he resigned in 2011, at which point FIFA terminated its investigations of him.

The U.S. criminal case will allow courts to look into matters that in the past had been investigated mainly by FIFA's own internal ethics committee, answerable to itself.

U.S. law gives its courts broad powers to investigate crimes committed by foreigners on foreign soil if money passes through U.S. banks or other activity takes place there.

U.S. prosecutors are expected to announce the case at a news conference at the Brooklyn U.S. attorney's office, which is leading the U.S. investigation.

Damian Collins, a British member of parliament who founded the reform group New FIFA Now, said the arrests and could have a massive impact on the governing body.

"The chickens are finally coming home to roost and this sounds like a hugely significant development for FIFA," he said by telephone.

"It proves that Sepp Blatter's promises over the last few years to look into corruption at FIFA have not materialized and because he has totally failed to do this, it has been left to an outside law enforcement agency to do the job and take action."

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