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FIFA's Blatter Lies Low Amid Scandal Involving Russia World Cup

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FIFA President Sepp Blatter announces Russia as the host nation for the FIFA World Cup 2018, in Zurich in this December 2, 2010 file picture.

ZURICH — Pressure mounted on FIFA President Sepp Blatter on Thursday as the corruption scandal at world soccer's governing body — including its awarding of the 2018 World Cup to Russia — continued to deepen.

Despite FIFA statements that it was business as usual following the arrest of seven senior figures on U.S. corruption charges, Blatter kept out of sight on Thursday when he failed to show up at a medical conference.

The embattled 79-year-old Swiss national, who rarely misses a FIFA-related event and usually stops to speak to the media, was also conspicuous by his absence on Wednesday when he failed to attend a meeting of African soccer delegates, assembled in Zurich ahead of Friday's FIFA Congress.

FIFA's chief medical officer, Michel D'Hooghe of Belgium, told the medical officers:

"President Blatter apologises for not being able to come today because of the turbulences you have heard about."

Those "turbulences" included a dawn raid by plainclothes police at one of Zurich's most luxurious hotels on Wednesday leaving seven of the most powerful figures in global football in custody overnight and facing extradition to the United States on corruption charges.

The Swiss authorities also announced a criminal investigation into the awarding of the next two World Cups being hosted in Russia in 2018 and Qatar in 2022.

U.S. authorities said nine football officials and five sports media and promotions executives faced corruption charges involving more than $150 million in bribes.

Those actions have sparked the gravest crisis in FIFA's 111-year history with confederations now seemingly in open warfare with one another, just a day before Blatter is expected to be re-elected as FIFA president for a fifth term on Friday.

Blatter, who has denied and survived allegations of his involvement in corruption, said in a statement on Wednesday: "Let me be clear: such misconduct has no place in football and we will ensure that those who engage in it are put out of the game."

Splits in World Game

As splits opened in the world game, UEFA, the European soccer confederation, called for the FIFA Congress, and the election of a new president, to be postponed amid suggestions it might boycott the event, but the AFC, the Asian confederation, backed Blatter and said the election should go ahead.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius disagreed, saying the vote should be delayed in light of the corruption investigation.

"It would make sense to take a bit of time, see what is true and not and then the authorities can adjudicate, but for now, it's giving a disastrous image," he told France Inter radio.

British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said there was "something deeply wrong at the heart of FIFA", while sports minister John Whittingdale said "a change in leadership of FIFA is very badly needed".

Britain has long been a critic of FIFA and unsuccessfully bid for the 2018 World Cup which was awarded to Russia.

Swiss prosecutors have opened their own criminal inquiry into allegations of mismanagement and money laundering related to the awarding of rights to host that tournament and the 2022 event in Qatar.

Blatter did, however, receive endorsement from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who accused the United States of meddling outside its jurisdiction by arresting FIFA officials.

"This is yet another blatant attempt to extend its jurisdiction to other states," Putin said, adding the arrests were a "clear attempt" to prevent Blatter's re-election and he had Russia's

backing.

The crisis has also shown up deep divisions in the French football federation.

Michel Platini, the French president of UEFA and a firm opponent of Blatter, is backing Blatter's presidential opponent Prince Ali bin Al Hussein of Jordan if Friday's election goes ahead.

However, the president of the French Football Association, Noel Le Graet, was backing Blatter as "he did not know Prince Ali".

Les Murray of Australia, a former FIFA Ethics committee member, called for Blatter to resign as have the FA chairmen of a number of leading European countries including England and Germany.

Meanwhile FIFA's blue-chip sponsors, many of whom have solidly backed FIFA despite nearly 20 years of bribery and corruption allegations, appeared to be growing unexpectedly concerned at events unfolding in Zurich.

In an unusually strongly worded statement, Visa Inc said: "It is important that FIFA makes changes now, so that the focus remain on these going forward. Should FIFA fail to do so, we have informed them that we will reassess our sponsorship."

German sportswear company Adidas said FIFA should do more to establish transparent compliance standards. Anheuser-Busch InBev, whose Budweiser brand is a sponsor of the 2018 World Cup, said it was closely monitoring developments at FIFA.

Coca-Cola Co, another FIFA sponsor, said the charges had "tarnished the mission and ideals of the FIFA World Cup and we have repeatedly expressed our concerns about these serious allegations".

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