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FIFA's Blatter Seeks Re-Election As Prosecutors Probe Russia's World Cup Bid

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FIFA President Sepp Blatter leaves the stage after making a speech during the opening ceremony of the 65th FIFA Congress in Zurich, Switzerland, May 28, 2015.

ZURICH — The embattled head of world soccer, FIFA President Sepp Blatter, is expected to be re-elected on Friday despite growing calls for his resignation amid a corruption scandal that prosecutors say includes the awarding of the 2018 World Cup to Russia.

At a meeting in Zurich starting at 07:30 GMT, up to 209 FIFA members will choose between Blatter, who is seeking his fifth term as president, and his sole challenger Prince Ali bin Al Hussein of Jordan.

Anger within Europe's powerful regional soccer body UEFA and other members over the damage allegations of graft are doing to FIFA is unlikely to be enough to topple the 79-year-old Swiss, who is backed by the Asian and African confederations.

The maths appears to be in Blatter's favor, despite some countries saying they were switching allegiance.

On Friday, New Zealand Football said it would vote for 39-year-old Prince Ali despite a previous unanimous commitment from countries in the Oceania Football Confederation in January to back Blatter.

"Given the developments in the past 48 hours — which have been deeply distressing for all of us who love football — New Zealand Football believes substantive change is now essential within FIFA as soon as possible to repair its tarnished reputation," NZF President Mark Aspden said in a statement.

In his first public appearance since Wednesday's dramatic events, when leading soccer officials were arrested in a dawn raid on their luxury Swiss hotel, Blatter said on Thursday that there was no room "for corruption of any kind."

"The events of [Wednesday] have cast a long shadow over football and this Congress," Blatter said.

He also sought to distance himself from the scandal, the biggest crisis FIFA has faced in its 111-year history.

"I know many people hold me ultimately responsible ... [but] I cannot monitor everyone all the time. If people want to do wrong, they will also try to hide it."

Investigations Widen

Nine soccer officials and five sports media and promotions executives have been charged by U.S. prosecutors with corruption they said involved more than $150 million in bribes.

Swiss authorities also announced a criminal investigation into the awarding of the next two World Cup tournaments, which are being hosted in Russia in 2018 and Qatar in 2022.

Both countries deny any suggestion of wrongdoing over their bids to host one of the world's top sporting events, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused the United States of meddling in an effort to prevent the re-election of Blatter.

Adding to the pressure on FIFA and Blatter, there are growing concerns from major sponsors, many of whom have solidly backed the organization despite nearly 20 years of bribery and corruption allegations.

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.

Credit card company Visa Inc urged immediate reforms.

"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," it said in a strongly worded statement.

Coca-Cola Co, another 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".

The corruption scandal is unlikely to go away soon, as investigations into wrongdoing widen.

A judge in Argentina ordered the arrest of three businessmen accused of conspiring to win and keep hold of lucrative media rights contracts from regional soccer federations through the payment of up to $110 million in bribes.

In Brazil, the Senate, led by former national soccer star Romario, now a legislator, moved to open a formal inquiry into bribes that authorities said were paid to obtain contracts with the Brazilian Soccer Federation.

Meanwhile, the Miami-based Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) president Jeffrey Webb, who was among those arrested, has been provisionally dismissed from his role, the confederation said on Thursday.

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