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FBI Extends FIFA Scrutiny to Russia's 2018 World Cup Host Bid

By The Moscow Times

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Chuck Blazer, left, shown here with Sepp Blatter, has been a key part of the F.B.I.'s investigation into FIFA.

The FBI's investigation of bribery and corruption at FIFA includes scrutiny of how soccer's governing body awarded World Cup hosting rights to Russia and Qatar, a U.S. law enforcement official said.

Russia and Qatar have denied wrongdoing in the conduct of their bids for the 2018 and 2022 tournaments, which were not the subject of charges announced by U.S. prosecutors a week ago against FIFA officials that stunned world soccer.

The U.S. law enforcement official, who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity, said the review of the bids would be part of a probe that goes beyond the indictments. Among issues the FBI is examining is the stewardship of FIFA by longtime president Sepp Blatter, who unexpectedly announced on Tuesday he was resigning shortly before it emerged that he

too was under investigation by U.S. law enforcement.

Authorities said last week they were investigating a case of $150 million paid in bribes over two decades, while Swiss prosecutors announced their own criminal inquiry into the 2018 and 2022 bids.

On Wednesday, the partially blacked out transcript of the November 2013 guilty plea of Chuck Blazer, a U.S. citizen and FIFA executive committee member from 1997 to 2013, showed he and others in FIFA agreed to accept bribes in bidding for the 1998 and 2010 World Cups and other tournaments.

"Among other things, I agreed with other persons in or around 1992 to facilitate the acceptance of a bribe in conjunction with the selection of the host nation for the 1998 World Cup," Blazer told a federal judge in New York, according to the transcript.

The tournament was hosted by France, but separate court documents contain the prosecutors' allegation that bidding nation Morocco paid a bribe to another FIFA executive, Jack Warner of Trinidad and Tobago, and that Blazer acted as intermediary. Warner has denied this and other charges against him, and late on Wednesday aired a paid political statement saying he feared for his life, but would tell investigators all he knows about corruption at FIFA.

Blazer went on to say in his plea hearing that from 2004 and through 2011 "I and others on the FIFA executive committee agreed to accept bribes in conjunction with the selection of South Africa as the host nation for the 2010 World Cup."

Blazer's lawyer declined to comment on Wednesday.

Many of the details were previously revealed in charging documents released by prosecutors when they announced indictments for 14 people, including nine FIFA officials.

Soccer power Brazil hosted the World Cup in 2014 but in the case of Qatar, there was some surprise that the tournament was awarded to a small desert country with no real soccer tradition and where daytime summer temperatures can top 40 degrees Celsius (104F).

Qatar's Foreign Minister Khaled al-Attiyah said there was no way his country would be stripped of its right to host the World Cup. "It is very difficult for some to digest that an Arab Islamic country has this tournament, as if this right can't be for an Arab state," he told Reuters in an interview in Paris. "I believe it is because of prejudice and racism that we have this bashing campaign against Qatar."

For its part, Russia dismissed concerns it might lose the right to host the cup. "Cooperation with FIFA is going on and, most importantly, Russia is continuing preparations for the 2018 World Cup," President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said.

Blatter Pressure

A source close to FIFA said it was Blatter's advisers who had told him he must quit. Critics pointed to the widening criminal probe, disquiet among sponsors, and pressure from European soccer body UEFA as possible reasons.

The international police organization Interpol put two former top FIFA officials on its wanted list at the request of U.S. authorities. It issued "red notices," which are not arrest warrants, for Warner, and Nicolas Leoz, the ex-head of South America's soccer federation.

FIFA has denied that another senior official, Secretary General Jerome Valcke, was involved in a $10 million payment approved by the South African Football Association that lies at the heart of the U.S. investigation.

At a news conference in Johannesburg, sports minister Fikile Mbalula confirmed the payment to Warner during the bid process but denied it was a bribe. Mbalula said the cash was intended for football development in the Caribbean.

Valcke said on Wednesday he was not guilty of corrupt practice relating to the payment and he saw no reason to resign.

Blatter announced his decision to step down six days after police raided a hotel in Zurich and arrested several FIFA officials, and four days after he was re-elected to a fifth term. Blatter has not been charged and FIFA did not respond to a request for comment on his being under investigation.

An election to choose a new president will probably not take place until at least December. Blatter, meanwhile, remains in his position.

See Also: Russian Twitter Users Plan Sepp Blatter's Life After FIFA

Former England captain David Beckham, who was a major figure in England's failed bid to host the 2018 World Cup, joined the chorus of calls for change at FIFA. "Some of the things that we now know happened were despicable, unacceptable and awful for the game that we love so much," he told Sky Sports.

Leadership Candidates

Among potential candidates to lead FIFA, UEFA chief Michel Platini, a former French international soccer star, is the favourite, ahead of Jordan's Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein, who withdrew from last week's presidential election after winning 73 votes to Blatter's 133 in the first round.

Chung Mong-joon, billionaire scion of South Korea's Hyundai conglomerate, said he would consider running.

Other possible candidates include Domenico Scala, the independent chairman of FIFA's audit and compliance committee, Jerome Champagne, a former French diplomat and FIFA deputy secretary general, and German Wolfgang Niersbach, an ex-media chief at FIFA. Former international stars Zico and Diego Maradona have also been mentioned.

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