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Sports Minister Slams Suspensions on Russian Athletes

By Sophia Guy-White

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Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko

Russia's sports minister on Monday criticized last week's decision to suspend the country's track and field athletes, calling it a display of "toughness," the TASS news agency reported.

Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko, a FIFA executive committee member and head of the committee organizing the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia said that "attempts to slam Russia are a popular trend and a way to demonstrate one's toughness. But politics should not be mixed up with sports," TASS reported.

Mutko had earlier appealed to the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) for Russian athletes to compete internationally under the Russian Olympic Committee while the All-Russia Athletic Federation (ARAF) underwent extensive reforms, the Interfax news agency reported Sunday.

The ARAF has adopted an anti-crisis plan in the hopes of resuming its membership in the IAAF within three months, the ARAF's acting president, Vadim Zelichenok, said Sunday, TASS reported.

The crisis plan aims to ensure that Russian track and field athletes are able to compete in the 2016 Summer Olympics.

"The goal has to be Russia being compliant again with all the international anti-doping regulations. That is the important thing, so that we have an even playing field for all the athletes," International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach said, The Associated Press reported Sunday.

Mutko, too, was confident that Russia would soon be able to compete again. "This ARAF suspension is temporary — a special commission will make things clear. I am convinced that everything can still be rectified," Mutko said Saturday, the TASS news agency reported.

An independent commission by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) recommended that the Russian athletics federation be declared "non-compliant" with the anti-doping code, and be suspended from track and field competition, the report published last week said. On that recommendation, the IAAF provisionally suspended Russia from international competition on Friday.

This ban will include the World Athletics Series and the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, if Russia cannot reform on time. Russia is no longer entitled to host the 2016 World Race Walking Cup in the Volga River city of Cheboksary, nor the 2016 World Junior Championships in Kazan.

"This has been a shameful wake up call and we are clear that cheating at any level will not be tolerated," IAAF President Sebastian Coe said in a press release Friday.

Former IAAF President Lamine Diack and the IAAF's former anti-doping manager are under investigation for allegedly taking bribes to cover up doping.

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