

The first head rolls

Football

AFP, London

Mark Palios on Sunday resigned as chief executive of the English Football Association, the first head to roll in the scandal over manager Sven-Goran Eriksson's affair with an FA secretary with whom Palios also had a brief relationship.

At first the FA denied the reports of the fling between Eriksson and the 38-year-old former model Faria Alam.

But days later it was forced into a hugely embarrassing admission that not only were the rumours true, but Palios also had a relationship with the same woman.

Palios said that he had informed FA chairman Geoff Thompson and his resignation was accepted with immediate effect.



MARK PALIOS

"I am very sad that I feel this is necessary," said Palios.

"It has been a privilege to be chief executive of the Football Association but with privilege comes the burden of responsibility."

"It is important for me to take ultimate responsibility for everything the FA has done, in good times and bad."

"Personally, I do not accept I have been guilty of any wrongdoing. But it

has become clear to me that my action tonight is essential to enable the FA to begin to return to normality.

"When I joined the FA it faced many serious challenges and a lot of very good things have been achieved in the past 13 months.

"I have had the privilege of working with an outstanding leadership team. For the time being, I intend to keep any further thoughts to myself."

Executive director David Davies has been put in temporary charge of the organisation with immediate effect, with the FA due to make a formal statement on the matter on Monday.

His departure comes as a major blow to Thompson, who announced on Tuesday that he had received categorical assurances that Palios had not misled or attempted to mislead the FA.

Events leading up to Palios' resignation began when the News of the World revealed details of Eriksson's affair



FARIA ALAM

with Alam three weeks ago.

The FA subsequently issued a strongly-worded denial of the story, claiming there was "no truth whatsoever" in the suggestion that Alam and Eriksson are having, or have had, a sexual relationship.

But Palios' position had come under increasing pressure after The News of the World tabloid newspaper reported Sunday that the FA had

offered them details of Eriksson's affair with Alam on the condition the paper stayed silent about the same woman's fling with Palios.

The paper printed a transcript of a phone call in which the FA's director of communications, Colin Gibson, seemingly tried to make the deal.

According to the paper, the call took place the day before it first published details of Eriksson's alleged affair with Alam last Sunday.

The News of the World, in an article headlined "Screwed!", quoted Gibson as saying: "What I'm proposing is that I give you chapter and verse on her (Faria) and Sven and get her to do an interview to say that she lied to everybody this week and that it was true."

"And the pay-off, obviously, is that we leave MP (Mark Palios) out of it. I've got the details, I've got the places, I've got the phone calls. I've got everything," Gibson said.

The News of the World said Alam refused to cooperate with the FA plan, so it ran its story exposing Palios' fling with the secretary.

Eriksson's future as national coach has been placed in jeopardy after the FA called an urgent meeting next week to discuss claims he misled the organisation over his alleged affair with Alam.

The 56-year-old Swede may be charged with gross misconduct and dismissed from his post if he is found to have lied about his relationship with Alam.

However the issue had been further complicated by the fact that Palios, a divorced father of five, also had a fling with Alam.

Palios was attempting a reconciliation with his ex-partner and was extremely keen to keep the affair out of the media, Gibson said, according to the News of the World.

Despite widespread reports that the FA plans to fire the Swede at next Thursday's meeting, Eriksson has insisted he will carry on with the job.

Adding to the confusion, leading employment lawyers have been cited as saying the FA might have a shaky

case dismissing someone simply for not being open about a love affair, while England players such as captain David Beckham, Frank Lampard and John Terry have publicly backed their coach.

Meanwhile, it was also confirmed that Gibson had offered his resignation to Thompson but was still awaiting a reply.



PHOTO: AFP

THE FOCUS IS HERE: Mediamen wait outside of the Football Association Headquarters in London yesterday in the wake of FA chief executive Mark Palios resignation. Palios resigned on Sunday, the first head to roll in the scandal over 56-year-old England football manager Sven Goran Eriksson's affair with 38-year-old former model Faria Alam with whom Palios also had a relationship.

Kahn not too sure about Ailton

AFP, Berlin

Germany skipper Oliver Kahn has criticised plans to allow Brazilian-born striker Ailton to play for the national team, it was reported on Sunday.

"I don't think it's a good idea," the Bayern Munich goalkeeper told the Welt am Sonntag newspaper.

"When a player wants to be in the national team, he must at least have a relationship with the country. He must be born here and have spent some years in the country."

"Otherwise, its German identity is at risk of being lost."

The 30-year-old Ailton, who has never played for the Brazilian national side, helped Werder Bremen to the German title last season will spend the 2004-05 campaign with Schalke 04.

In a similar case, Luis Figo criticised the inclusion of Brazilian-born midfielder Deco in Portugal's squad for Euro 2004.

SEMIFINAL: BAHRAIN V JAPAN

Zico seeks calm



AFP, Jinan

Japan coach Zico has appealed to Chinese fans to lay off the loud booing that has marred the champions' Asian Cup campaign ahead of Tuesday's crunch semi-final with Bahrain.

Japan have been heckled throughout the tournament by local crowds still incensed over World War II atrocities and their team bus was rushed by an angry mob after a group game in Chongqing.

"I hope the fans can be reasonable," said the Brazilian legend. "They shouldn't be bringing political colours to the pitch."

The game has been given added spice by Japan's highly controversial penalty shoot-out with Jordan, which they won after being granted an unprecedented change of ends when two penalties down.

Zico, who is leading Japan's charge

SEMIFINAL: IRAN V CHINA

Hosts' task cut out



AFP, Beijing

Coach Arie Haan has mustered a plan to topple a powerful Iran brimming with confidence in the Asian Cup semi-finals -- attack from the whistle.

The former Dutch star knows China face a different ball game against the three time champions as he looks to steer his team into their first Asian Cup final since 1984.

China's group was seen as the easiest of the four in the tournament and while Iraq showed pluck and courage in their 3-0 quarter-final loss to China on Friday, they are not in the same league as Iran.

A 2-2 draw against Bahrain, a 5-0 walloping of a lowly 10-man Indonesia and a scrappy 1-0 win against a rudderless Qatar were not the most convincing of performances.

Haan would do well to heed the words of South Korean coach Jo Bonfrere, who is under no illusions about Iran's capabilities after seeing his team lose 4-3 in their quarter-final in Jinan on Saturday.

"You can't compare Iran with the Arab teams," said Bonfrere.

"Iran are much more powerful, they will fight harder and are stronger."

Haan acknowledged the mammoth task he faces when the two teams meet in Beijing's Workers' Stadium on Tuesday.

"Iran is a very strong attacking team but that doesn't mean we will want to think about defence," he told reporters.

"We cannot play like South Korea. We must have a more attacking form to win."

Much rests on the shoulders of veteran striker Hao Haidong, whose goals have been vital for China in recent months.

While Hao failed to go the distance

against Iraq, Haan said his only injury worry was defender Wei Xin and his team would likely remain unchanged, meaning Manchester City's Sun Jihai will be on the bench for the fifth straight game.

The shining light of the tournament for Haan has been German-based midfielder Shao Jiayi whose piercing runs into the opposition half and uncanny knack of popping up in the right place have been a revelation.

Alongside Zhao Junzhe, the pair have turned into a formidable midfield duo and if they can dictate the action against Iran then China could emerge victorious.



HAO HAIDONG

But Haan knows nothing can be taken for granted against a team that has staged a remarkable turnaround from its early tournament troubles that saw three players suspended for fighting and stamping against Oman.

Coach Branko Ivankovic has restored discipline, and confidence in the Iranian camp is running sky high after their sensational win against World Cup semi-finalists South Korea.

"They had a lot of problems and faced them and became mentally very strong," said Haan. "So we know they are very strong mentally and physically."

The pragmatic Ivankovic said that while his team has shown remarkable spirit, they would need a little luck against China.

"He (Haan) is a very smart man and I know he will prepare his team well," said the experienced Croat, who led Iran to a gold medal winning victory over Japan in the 2002 Asian Games.

"If I want to beat him, I will need a little luck."

If China want to be making waves in Saturday's final instead of treading water in Friday's third place playoff they will have to find a way to shut down Ali Karimi, Iran's hat-trick scorer against South Korea.



ALI KARIMI

"Ali Karimi is one of the best players in Asia, and he has proved that to everyone," said Ivankovic, and warned that last year's Asian Player of the Year Mehdi Mahdavi was also on awe-some form.

With defensive stalwart Yahya Golmohammadi expected to line up with Ali Badavi and Rahman Rezae, again available after serving suspensions for slapping each other in the match against Oman, China will need everything Shao and Hao have to offer.

It suits Eriksson?

Football

AFP, London

England football manager Sven-Goran Eriksson, reeling after revelations of his affair with an English Football Association secretary, emerged strengthened after the resignation of FA chief executive Mark Palios, Monday's press reported.

Palios resigned on Sunday, the first head to roll in the scandal over 56-year-old Eriksson's affair with 38-year-old former model Faria Alam with whom Palios also had a relationship.

Just days before a meeting that will decide the future of the Swedish coach with the England eleven, it was "Sven 1, FA 0," according to the mass-circulation tabloids the Sun and the Daily Mail.

Events leading up to Palios' resignation began when the weekly News of the World revealed details of Eriksson's affair with Alam two weeks ago.

The FA subsequently issued a strongly-worded denial of the story, claiming there was "no truth what-

soever" in the suggestion that Alam and Eriksson are having, or have had, a sexual relationship.

But days later it was forced into a hugely embarrassing admission that not only were the rumours true, but Palios also had a relationship



SVEN-GORAN ERIKSSON

with the same woman.

Palios' position came under increasing pressure after The News of the World tabloid newspaper reported Sunday that the FA had offered it details of Eriksson's affair with Alam on the condition the paper stayed silent about the same

woman's fling with Palios.

Monday's papers all published pictures of a smiling Eriksson photographed late Sunday in Amsterdam.

The Mirror tabloid said he could be "the only senior figure to survive the Faria Alam scandal."

The Guardian, referring to Eriksson's colourful love-life, wrote: "For surely the first time, the Swede is the wronged party in a relationship," adding: "Eriksson's hand is strengthened but there are no winners."

The Independent said the FA was embroiled in its "worst-ever crisis" and "sent to meltdown". Eriksson was "set to carry on" but his fate was "uncertain."

After "a stunning own goal by the FA" many heads were set to roll, according to the Daily Mail. But Eriksson was protected by the high regard of his players, plus a clause in his contract that would cost the FA dear to sack him.

Only one popular newspaper, the Daily Express, called for Eriksson's resignation. But even it did not condemn the England coach.

Iran has historical edge



AFP, Beijing

Iran has won nine and tied four of its last 15 matches against China and is hoping to use its past dominance as a psychological edge to counter homefield advantage in Tuesday's Asian Cup semi-final.

The biggest loss for China in recent memory was when it squandered a 2-0 second half lead over Iran in a 1997 World Cup qualifier at home and eventually went down 4-2.

Seven years later, Chinese players still remember the first Iranian goal was scored by Ali Daei on a disputed penalty kick which changed the tone of the match and ultimately led to China failing to qualify for the World Cup finals.

"The main reason we lost was because of the penalty kick, and that was the goal you (Daei) scored," Chinese midfielder Li Ming told Daei at a meeting set up here for the media.

"If it wasn't for that disputed penalty kick we would not have lost."

Both Li and Daei played in the 1997 match and have been key mem-

bers of their national sides since.

"Seven years ago your team scored the first two goals and I remember that it was you who scored in the second half," Daei told Li.

"I have played against the Chinese side so many times it is difficult to say exactly how many times, and as far as I can remember we basically won them all, for this I apologize," he added, with a wink.

Because of the 1997 match, the 35-year-old Daei remains a villain to many Chinese fans, despite his remarkable career which has seen him score a record 95 goals in 129 international matches.

The two players joked and discussed their football careers, but when parting Li embraced Daei and said with a grin: "I will kill you."

Daei replied: "We will win."

Li added that China was non-plussed with Iran's dramatic quarter-final win over South Korea on Saturday, a feat that China has been unable to produce for nearly two decades.

"We can't look at Iran's 4-3 win over South Korea as something extraordinary, 2004 is not 1997. Chinese players are better now that we have our professional league," Li said.

"All we need to do is stabilize our defense, don't let them set the pace of the game and bring our attack forward. Then we will win."

I Ching, the Tao and Becks!

Football

REUTERS, Tokyo

In the movie 'Shaolin Soccer' a bunch of down-at-heel Hong Kong footballers call on the spirit of Oriental mysticism, and a little bit of kung-fu, to overcome their arch-rivals.

Perhaps it was only a matter of time before David Beckham headed down the same road. The latest talisman for his journey into Eastern mysticism is a new pair of boots.

Or to be more precise, 723 new pairs of boots.

Last week the England captain unveiled the David Beckham Limited Edition Predator Pulse boots in Tokyo.

Only 723 pairs will be sold around the world, at a price of 723 euros (\$870). The figure 723 is a somewhat less divine combination of his England and Real Madrid shirt numbers. The boots are only available in British size 9, Beckham's size.

Each pair will come in a wooden box inspired, according to adidas PR boss Thomas Schaikvan, by an Asian shrine and accompanied by a booklet designed with an Asian flavor.

"There are quotes from Confucius in the packaging and the history of David's football career is described in the booklet," Schaikvan informed the spellbound Japanese press.

He described the silver and red shoes as Beckham's "yin and yang boots" and said they were inspired by the sight of a Japanese boy wearing a pair of odd-coloured adidas boots.

The boy's shoes, one red and one

blue, are the colours that make up the central yin and yang symbol on South Korea's flag.

Maybe the boy was Korean.

Beckham looked overwhelmed by the flow of ancient qi -- the circulating life energy that in Chinese philosophy is thought to be inherent in all things -- that was emanating from the boots.

His disciples waited for a sign, and then the master spoke.

"I think the box is very special," Beckham philosophised.

"Everything that comes with the boots is very special but to have the yin...and the yang effect in the boots I think makes it extra special, not just for me but, obviously, in Japan."

A country where, he hesitated to tell

us, most people spend a good part of their days talking about Chinese philosophy, the I Ching, the Tao and one's inner conflict.

Therein lies a problem. According to Taoist philosophy, the yin and yang are the two fundamental elements in the universe. But they are opposites and they act in conflict.

So, for example, just as you're about to take a penalty, it is possible that your 'yin' boot will come into conflict with your 'yang' boot and send the ball flying over Portugal's bar.

Confucius may have said, "That's a lot of mumbo-jumbo," but the next time Beckham misses a penalty, he can at least blame his conflicting yin-yang boots.

