



Nigeria FA apologises

REUTERS, Abuja

Nigeria's football federation (NFF) on Sunday overhauled its leadership and apologised for the poor state of its national team in a last-minute bid to reverse a directive suspending it from international matches.

President Goodluck Jonathan imposed the suspension last week following the embarrassing performance by the Super Eagles in the World Cup. The team were knocked out in the first round after failing to win a game.

Soccer's world governing body has given Nigeria until Monday evening to change its decision and escape being barred from all FIFA-related activities.

A Nigerian presidency source said on Friday the suspension would hold despite FIFA's threats.

However, a communique from an emergency NFF executive committee meeting on Saturday said: "We wish to passionately appeal to the president to reconsider the earlier decision."

The committee fired its top two leaders and offered an "unreserved apology" to the West African nation's 140 million citizens for the national team's failures.

"The leadership of the present NFF executive committee should be held responsible for the current crisis in Nigerian football," the committee said.

If the Nigerian government fails to heed FIFA's ultimatum, it risks being cut off from all FIFA activities, including junior and female competitions, and also losing FIFA funding.

A ban would also cut access to FIFA's development courses and stop the annual payment each member associations receives, cash that is much needed by Nigerian football.



PONDERING FUTURE? Brazil coach Dunga arrives at the Salgado Filho International Airport in Porto Alegre, south of Brazil, on Sunday after his side was knocked out in the quarterfinals of the World Cup by Netherlands. Only a few hours after returning to his homeland, Dunga learned the news of his sacking.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Five up for Brazil post

AFF, Rio De Janeiro

The Brazilian Football Federation (CBF) has drawn up a list of five candidates to replace the sacked Dunga as Brazil coach it was reported by local media.

Brazil's 2002 World Cup winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari heads the list while the other hopefuls are Mano Menezes of Corinthians, Muricy Ramalho of Fluminense, Ricardo Gomes of Sao Paulo and former AC Milan handler and 1994 World Cup winning player Leonardo.


Scolari remains the favourite to be installed for a second time because according to sources within the CBF cited in the press the federation's president Ricardo Teixeira wants an experienced coach "who can withstand the pressure that comes with a World Cup finals being hosted in Brazil (as they host the 2014 edition)".

Dunga, 46, who skipped Brazil to the 1994 World Cup, had been national team coach since 2006.

He had already said that he was intending to step down after four years following the five-time champions 2-1 defeat to Holland in the quarter-finals in Port Elizabeth on Friday.


However, on his arrival home on Sunday, Dunga did not rule out staying in the job.

"I am going to rest before meeting, in one or two weeks' time, the president of the CBF, Ricardo Teixeira to talk about it (extending his stay in charge)," Dunga told a news conference before the CBF quickly shattered his optimism.



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Spain to keep attacking

REUTERS, Potchefstroom

Spain must remain faithful to their fast-flowing, attacking style against Germany in Wednesday's World Cup semifinal, according to coach Vicente del Bosque.

The European champions have kept alive their hopes of a first World Cup triumph thanks to the creative flair of players like Xavi, Andres Iniesta and the prolific David Villa.

"We have to be, or try to be, faithful to our style, with the competitive spirit we have shown," Del Bosque said at a news conference at Spain's training base in Potchefstroom.

"We started off this World Cup with the (1-0 Group H) defeat to Switzerland, which was so painful, but now the joy of four consecutive wins has put us in the semifinals and we hope to make the most of it."

Spain, by contrast, are little changed from the team that lifted the European Championship trophy in Vienna two years ago.

"They (Germany) recently began a rebuilding exercise for a team that appeared to be worn out," Del Bosque said.

"They started from scratch and managed to rejuvenate the side and are feeling their way at this tournament while respecting players from the past."

"I think they have made advances, although Germany have always been strong."

Asked whether Torres, who returned from knee surgery shortly before the World Cup, would be in the starting 11 to face Germany, Del Bosque said he believed he would.

"He continues to be an important player for us and one that the other squad members are used to," he added.

"All strikers go through good and bad runs but he brings his work rate and his personality to the team and he is still our forward."

Dunga axed, Maradona praised

AFF, Johannesburg

Favourites Netherlands were warned not to underestimate Uruguay ahead of a World Cup semifinal on Tuesday while Brazil axed coach Dunga and fans of fellow flops Argentina want Diego Maradona to stay.

Legend Franz Beckenbauer hailed Germany as a "perfect team" while semifinal opponents Spain heard centreback Carles Puyol and reserve midfielder Cesc Fabregas are fit for the other semifinal in Durban on Wednesday.

As the tournament entered the final straight in South Africa leading to the July 11 Johannesburg climax, sell-out crowds braced for individual show-downs set to enthrall them and multi-million international television audiences.

Dutch duo Wesley Sneijder and Arjen Robben come face to face with Uruguayan star Diego Forlan while goal kings David Villa of Spain and Miroslav Klose of Germany square off in another spicy cameo.

Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk has begged his players to keep their feet on the ground and ignore the hype as they carry the tag of firm favourites into a showdown with injury and suspension-hit Uruguay.

"It will be a very dangerous match. The euphoria at home is massive and maybe it is good that we are so far away and cannot witness it because we really need to focus

on Uruguay."

Veteran Uruguay coach Oscar Tabarez countered: "We are among the four best teams at this World Cup. This is something we would never have imagined before coming to South Africa. My players are united."

Uruguay are handicapped by the loss of striker Luis Suarez, barred after his red card for a deliberate goal-line handball that prevented Ghana becoming the first semi-finalists from Africa.

Defender Jorge Fucile is also suspended and captain and defender Diego Lugano and midfielder Nicolas Lodeiro are injury doubts, heaping ever more pressure on graceful workaholic Forlan.

Netherlands defender Gregory van der Wiel and midfielder Nigel de Jong miss out after picking up second yellow cards of the tournament in the come-from-behind triumph over Brazil.

Hard-to-please Beckenbauer said the Germans will be favoured to defeat Spain in a repeat of the Euro 2008 final settled by a Fernando Torres goal.

"This team, it is the masterpiece of Joachim Loew. He has placed his mark on its make-up and created a perfect team," the World Cup winner as a player and a coach told the national football federation website.

"I have rarely seen such mastery of the game from a German team. Perhaps only in the 1970s and the World Cup-winning

team of 1990," he said after the 4-0 quarterfinal rout of Argentina.

"In the past we would say that you had to leave the beautiful game in the dressingroom, but this team shows that it is not a contradiction and that you can play well and win."

Luiz Felipe Scolari, who coached Brazil to the 2002 title, was tipped to replace Dunga, who must have known his four-year reign was over when the final whistle blew in Port Elizabeth last Friday and the Dutch celebrated.

Scolari reportedly heads a five-man 'wish list' including Mano Menezes of Corinthians, Muricy Ramalho of Fluminense, Ricardo Gomes of Sao Paulo and former AC Milan handler and 1994 World Cup winner Leonardo.

Brazilian players were insulted, pushed and shoved by angry fans when they arrived in Rio de Janeiro amid a welter of recriminations for the poor showing by the record five-time champions.

But there was a warm welcome for Maradona and Argentina from thousands of supporters who turned out to greet them despite the humiliating quarterfinal exit.

Fans dressed in the blue and white shirts of the national team held aloft banners proclaiming "Argentina!", "Diego, Diego" and "Diego, stay! We support you!"

A World Cup recipe

REUTERS, Cape Town

If Spain's soccer team were a wine they would be a classy red, a blend of mourvedre, cabernet franc and tempranillo grapes with a dash of cabernet sauvignon reflecting their elegance and pace.

Argentina would be a fruity and chunky wine with dominant shiraz and malbec grapes over a nebbiolo, petit verdot, cabernet franc and sauvignon body, giving it a lively nose.

South African winemaker Roberto Bottega, whose family run the Da Capo vineyard outside Cape Town, devised different blends of wine to reflect eight World Cup teams as part of the Stellenbosch wine festival.


"First of all, I thought about the players' qualities and then I tried to align these with the characters of different grapes. Merlot for example is like an elegant midfield," said Bottega.

South Africa's famous Pinotage grapes give a wine the strength and firmity defenders should give a team. The more defensive a team the more robust the wine blend. The more attacking a team, the more fruity.


"On paper the England blend is a classy Bordeaux. They are supposed to be good but sometimes can be boring," said Bottega.

Argentina have departed after losing to Germany but of the four semifinalists -- Uruguay, Netherlands, Spain and the Germans -- Bottega prepared wines for all but the Uruguayans.

On the taste front the winemaker declared Spain the clear winner, with the Dutch wine the runner-up.



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SQUARE-EYED GERMANS

Germany's success has not only boosted record sales of beer but threatens to make couch potatoes of the people. Almost nine out of 10 Germans sat down to watch the 4-0 humiliation of Argentina on Saturday. German TV station ZDF announced that viewing figures had reached 89.2 percent of the population or 25.95 million people had watched the match.

EXIT COSTS BRAZIL ECONOMY

The early exit of five-time champions Brazil has not only disappointed the football-mad people but also made a serious dent in many others hopes of making a small fortune out of merchandise associated with the 'Selecao'. According to a report produced by the Rio Chamber of Commerce the vendors stand to lose out on 42 million dollars (33.5 million euros). "Realistically, they are very difficult to sell, even with a 50 percent discount," said the director of the Chamber of Commerce.

SOUR GRAPES

The Dutch might be in the area in South Africa renowned for its vineyards but one of their former stars Patrick Kluivert could be accused of an attack of sour grapes. The Champions League winner with Ajax and a member of the Dutch side that lost on penalties to Brazil in the 1998 World Cup semifinals has been left underwhelmed by the present squad's achievements even though they managed to beat Brazil 2-1 in the quarterfinals. "Reaching the semifinals was imperative! But in terms of the manner of how they have done it, there really is room to do much better."

OBEDIENT COACH WANTED

Japan's soccer chief wants the country's next coach to be a philosopher and not cantankerously set in his ways.

Japan got it half right with the poetry-writing Takeshi Okada, who led the Blue Samurai to the last 16 of the World Cup in South Africa and is set to be replaced in August.

"The next coach should have his own philosophy and not be stubborn," Japan Football Association (JFA) president Motoaki Inukai told reporters on Monday.

"He must be good at handling the media and have charisma. We won't be

simply looking for a big name."

Former Argentina coaches Marcelo Bielsa and Jose Pekerman have been linked with the Japan job since Okada's side exited the World Cup after a penalty shootout defeat by Paraguay.

Okada had an often frosty relationship with the Japanese media after a string of abject performances in their World Cup build-up which tested the patience of Inukai.

Okada's promise that his Japan side would be like "swarming flies" in South Africa also went down badly, with Inukai sniffing "he could at least have said 'wasps!'"

POSITIVE DUTCH THINKING

A Dutch company is rather tempting fate by deciding to make flags with the Netherlands world champions 2010 should the Dutch beat Uruguay in the semifinal. The company (DKK) insists that this is not an extraordinary financial risk given that the Dutch have yet to win a World Cup and would face either European champions Spain or Germany in the final on Sunday. "This is not arrogance, just positive thinking," a director of the company said.

Melo abused Brazil returned to a hostile reception from fans as the inquest into their World Cup exit continues in earnest. Felipe Melo took the brunt of the criticism as supporters threw insults and pushed and shoved towards the players after their flight back from South Africa had touched down in Rio de Janeiro.

Melo was flanked by bodyguards as he left the airport through a side door and ran for cover as fans heckled him over his performance, calling him one of the "fathers of defeat." He then got into a car and was driven away by his father.

GERMANS HIT TOP GEAR

The German players were given welcome time off after they outclassed Argentina 4-0 in Saturday's quarterfinal. But some opted for a more nervewracking type of relaxation. Reserves Mario Gomez and Holger Badstuber along with rising star Thomas Mueller, who is suspended for the semifinal with Spain, along with injured captain Michael Ballack went to a test circuit for cars located near their hotel for a driving lesson in powerful cars....patriots to the bone they chose only German cars.



KLUIVERT



MELO

Back to square one

REUTERS, Cape Town

Diego Maradona's Argentina, having promised so much at the World Cup, find themselves back at square one with the same problems which plagued them in the South American qualifiers.

Argentina's four wins at the finals, scoring first in them all, hid frailties subsequently exposed by Germany in their 4-0 rout in Saturday's quarterfinal at Green Point Stadium.

The attack was unable to bail them out. In fact, in 13 competitive matches under Maradona, Argentina never came back to win after falling behind.

FIFA player of the year Lionel Messi, touted as the potential player of the finals, retreated deeper into midfield in each of Argentina's five matches.

A puzzled Maradona, who is regarded as having almost singlehandedly won Argentina's second world title in Mexico in 1986, said: "It's different now ... I think players used to play much more for themselves and today players are more practical, more team oriented... (that is) the new fashion."

"We had players who would carry the team on their shoulders."

On Saturday, Germany coach Joachim Loew had the answer to Maradona's tactics.

"Argentina are a team divided between the defence and the attack. That was the key to be able to control the midfield and from there build our victory," said Loew, a contemporary of Maradona's, not in the same league as a player but clearly more than his match as a coach.

Behind after three minutes, Argentina were under constant pressure from the flanks with fullbacks Nicolas Otamendi and Gabriel Heinze, both central defenders at club level, struggling to cope with Germany's pace.

The goals Argentina's talented forwards

scored in the group games and the second round against Mexico also hid the fact that the midfield lacked bite.

Maradona, who was regularly found wanting from the touchline during the qualifiers, provided no answers from the bench except to boost his attack when Argentina were ahead.

Having dispensed with Juan Roman Riquelme or even Esteban Cambiasso or Fernando Gago as a central midfield partner for Javier Mascherano, the team's captain was horribly exposed on his own in the middle.

Why did Maradona not play Juan Sebastian Veron, the one man in the squad who could have given Argentina more ball holding and depth of passing?

Germany's Bastian Schweinsteiger controlled midfield doing a job that Veron might have done for Argentina, even taking the free kicks like the one that led to their opening goal.

When former coach Alfio Basile quit suddenly in September 2008, a candidate for the Argentina job was Sergio Batista, Maradona's former 1986 World Cup teammate, who had steered the under-23s to their second successive Olympic gold medal.

The job went instead to Maradona, who opted against what would have, in retrospect, been a wise choice in taking Batista as an assistant.

Maradona returns to Argentina to ponder his future, knowing his family will urge him to carry on, since that the job has done the former drug addict so much good on a personal level.

He has an agreement with the Argentine Football Association (AFA) until next year when Argentina host the Copa America and he said in a television interview shortly before the finals he was also building towards that tournament.

AFA president Julio Grondona is unlikely to stand in Maradona's way.