

22 FROM LAOS, CAMBODIA GET LIFE BANS FOR FIXING

KUALA LUMPUR: Twenty-two players and officials from Laos and Cambodia have been handed life bans in one of Asian football's biggest mass punishments for match-fixing. The Asian Football Confederation said the action follows an investigation that started in 2014, and that it will seek to have the bans extended worldwide.

"The (AFC) Disciplinary Committee has issued a life ban from football-related activities to twenty-two individuals from Laos and Cambodia for involvement in the manipulation of matches involving the representative teams of Laos and the club side Lao Toyota FC," a statement said late on Wednesday. "The AFC investigation into the manipulation of matches involving the representative teams of the Lao Football Federation commenced in 2014 and remains ongoing," it added.

Fifteen of those banned are current or former players of the Laos national side or Vientiane-based Lao Toyota FC, the AFC said. Details of the games involved were not released, but four of the players had been provisionally suspended during the AFC Solidarity Cup involving Laos in November. "(The players') ongoing participation provided a direct threat to the integrity of the competition," the AFC said at the time, adding that the suspensions also related to "suspected manipulation of multiple matches committed by the representative teams of Laos since 2010".

Laos played three matches at the Solidarity Cup, beating Sri Lanka 2-1 and Mongolia 3-0, and losing 4-1 to Macau. Poorly paid Asian footballers and officials have long been vulnerable to advances from match-fixers seeking to manipulate games for betting purposes, giving rise to a long list of scandals. Among the largest was China banning 33 players and officials for life in 2013, following a three-year investigation into notorious corruption in its domestic leagues.

In 2007, two Vietnamese footballers were jailed and six others given suspended sentences for rigging an under-23 match against Myanmar at the 2005 Southeast Asian Games. Last year's AFC Champions League winners, Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, have been banned from this year's competition over a match-fixing scandal relating to South Korea's K-League. —AFP

ZEMAN SET FOR SHOCK RETURN WITH PESCARA

MILAN: Former Roma coach Zdenek Zeman is set for a surprise return to Serie A as boss of rock-bottom Pescara, reports said yesterday. Zeman, a legendary figure in the Italian game who has also coached Lazio, Napoli and Cagliari, was sacked by Roma in February 2013 after a string of poor results left the capital side in eighth place. According to reports in the Gazzetta dello Sport, the 69-year-old Czech, who spent a season with Swiss side FC Lugano last year, will sign a deal to take over the Adriatic coast club until June 2018.

Pescara sacked coach Massimo Oddo on Tuesday, three days after a 5-3 defeat to Torino. A week earlier, two cars belonging to Pescara president Daniele Sebastiani were set alight in an arson attack blamed on hardline "ultra" fans upset at the club's poor form. Pescara have shipped a league-leading 55 goals in 24 games and are 13 points from safety. Zeman initially became famous in Italy during a five-year spell at Foggia, whom he led from the third division to Serie A and the cusp of qualification for the UEFA Cup for three consecutive seasons. —AFP

MYANMAR, FROM ASIA'S PRIDE TO STEADY SLIDE

YANGON: Shouts reverberate under the concrete overpass as barefoot players jostle for the ball, a sad echo of Myanmar's long-lost footballing glory days which authorities are now hoping to revive. Once an Asian powerhouse, Myanmar's football fortunes suffered a precipitous decline under the former military junta whose 50-year reign ravaged the economy and sporting infrastructure.

Myanmar, formerly Burma, won the 1966 and 1970 Asian Games and were crowned Southeast Asian champions five times in a row. But they are now wallowing at 159th in the FIFA rankings, much to the dismay of their long-suffering fans. Ye Aung Oo, who plays under the Yangon overpass every night, says he hopes attempts to stimulate football at the grassroots level will help turn Myanmar's passion into prowess on the pitch.

"I have loved playing football since I was young and I wanted to play professionally," said the 20-year-old computer technician. He admits that the national team "needs a lot" of work, but adds: "I hope that with time we will be successful, now that more support is being developed." Hopes of a rebirth are now growing with FIFA president Gianni Infantino set to open a new academy in Yangon on Friday, part of a push to reinvigorate grassroots football.

The British Council has also brought in experts from English Premier League clubs including Arsenal, Newcastle United and Everton to teach dozens of coaches. The Myanmar Football Federation is training 50 young players to take part in the ASEAN under-18 competition to be held September, and another pan-Asian competition the following month. And the body is extending its scouting network to 52 towns and cities to find more young talent for its football academies. "Most international football federation can access very talented players easily" from domestic clubs, explained chief executive Phone Naing Zaw. But in Myanmar, "the MFF has to dig to the grassroots, open football training classes and run academies. This is very different."

Fallen Angels

Myanmar's "golden age" of the 1960s and 70s, which also included a berth at the 1972 Munich Olympics, still evokes nostalgia among fans and players. "We were very good at football at that time and went to (South) Korea," said 71-year-old former defender Myo Win Nyunt, describing the 1972 President's Cup. "We beat them at home and became the champions. That was my greatest memory as we did it for our country," he told AFP at his home, surrounded by trophies from a bygone era.

But the glory of Myanmar's national team, the White Angels, faded as the junta's stranglehold on the economy tightened. Amidst the decline, former military leader Than Shwe considered buying Manchester United for \$1 billion before shelving the idea, according to leaked US diplomatic cables from 2009. Today Myanmar's National League still inspires fierce rivalries and even hooliganism among its avid fans, but matches rarely draw big crowds.

Football fans are more likely to be



YANGON: This photo is taken on February 9, 2017 shows youth playing football on the street in downtown Yangon.



YANGON: This photo is taken on January 26, 2017 shows Myo Win Nyunt, (71), a former national football player, talking during an interview. —AFP

found watching Arsenal or Chelsea in a street corner beer station than attending domestic matches, or playing themselves. Many blame the dearth of green spaces in cities like Yangon, which have been eaten up by the housing developments that have mushroomed as the economy fires back to life as Myanmar reopens to the outside world.

Others bemoan a lack of sport in

schools, academic pressure on students, and a shortage of well-qualified scouts to seek out new talent. "There were many playgrounds to play football in Yangon (when I was young) and now there are none," said prominent sports journalist Sein Myo Myint. "Students have to have extra tuition before school and again after school, so they have no time to go to the football pitch." —AFP