

TOP SIERRA LEONE OFFICIALS ARRESTED OVER CORRUPTION

FREETOWN: Three of Sierra Leone's top football officials were arrested and detained overnight over alleged corruption offences, the head of the country's anti-graft agency told AFP yesterday. Police picked up the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA) president, Isha Johansen, her vice-president Brima Kamara and secretary-general Chris Kamara on Wednesday night, and drove them to the headquarters of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in Freetown before they were taken into custody.

ACC chief Ady Macauley told AFP their arrests related to "discrepancies in the financial statement of the SLFA relating to donor and public funds to the amount of \$3.5 million," since Johansen assumed office in 2013. Macauley said Johansen, Kamara and Kamara had been invited to speak to the ACC on several occasions but had failed to respond. The ACC had announced the start of "Operation Thunderbolt" on Wednesday, which it said would "bring to justice" individuals known to the commission who may have been involved in graft.

According to SLFA officials in Freetown the association is not accountable to the government of Sierra Leone but to FIFA's account committee, which usually audit national associations. Neither the arrested officials nor their lawyers could not be reached for a comment but have in the past denied any wrongdoing, referring to the ACC drive as "political interference".

The head of the Criminal Investigations Department, Chief Superintendent Mohamed Kamara, confirmed the three spent the night in their custody, though none have been charged. They remained in custody and were undergoing questioning by Thursday lunchtime, and Johansen was refused a request to be transferred to hospital, the police chief said, until a doctor had seen her. Johansen was elected president of the Sierra Leone Football Association on August 3, 2013 after her main opponent, former Sierra Leone International footballer Mohamed Kallon, was disqualified.

Since then she has faced heavy criticism from football executives, with several local clubs boycotting the national leagues. A presidential committee was set up to address the conflict but failed to make headway. Johansen founded her own club, FC Johansen, in 2004 with the objective of giving hope to a group of young footballers. She is Sierra Leone's first female FA president, and also serves on FIFA's security and integrity committee.

Many Sierra Leoneans have long blamed corruption for the poor performance of the Leone Stars national team. The news comes less than a week after FIFA named a new chief finance officer following the massive financial scandal that rocked the world football body last year. The former postholder Markus Kattner was fired for his involvement in a staggering multi-million dollar self-enrichment plot through illicit bonus payments and pay rises that also helped bring down former president Sepp Blatter and secretary general Jerome Valcke. — AFP



NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic of Serbia hits a return against Jo-Wilfried Tsonga of France during their 2016 US Open Men's Singles match at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. — AFP

DJOKOVIC FAVORITE AS PRETENDERS LINE-UP AT US OPEN SEMI-FINALS

NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic heads into the US Open semi-finals as the overwhelming favorite to go on and lift a third title in New York, but Kei Nishikori, Stan Wawrinka and Gael Monfils are potential road blocks. World number one Djokovic takes a 12-0 career lead over Monfils into their semi-final today while Nishikori looks to build on his shock five-set win over Andy Murray against Wawrinka.

Swiss third seed Wawrinka, playing in his third semi-final in four years, ended Juan Martin del Potro's magical run in the early hours of Thursday morning with a four-set win. World number one Djokovic, chasing a third major of the season and 13th overall, remains wary of the dangers posed by 30-year-old Monfils who is in only his second semi-final at the Slams.

"Gael's one of the few players that I will definitely pay a ticket to watch," said Djokovic. "He seems more focused at this time of his career and I am definitely expecting a tough battle." Tenth-seeded Monfils has lost twice to Djokovic in New York—in five sets in the first round in 2005 and a straight sets defeat in the 2010 quarter-finals. But he is enjoying one of the best spells of his career, winning the title in Washington and making the semi-finals at the Toronto Masters where he lost to Djokovic again. Monfils is on an impressive 19-2 run since Wimbledon but admits he's the underdog against Djokovic, the 2011 and 2015

champion playing in a 10th successive semi-final in New York. "He's better player than me, definitely," said Monfils who has yet to drop a set but hasn't faced a seeded player. Djokovic should be the fresher having completed just two full matches in five rounds. He was handed a walkover into round three and was then the beneficiary of two injury-hit retirements. All of which means the Serb has spent just 4 hours and 34 minutes on court; Monfils has been out there four minutes short of 12 hours.

Nishikori returns to semis

Nishikori reached the semi-final—his first at any Slam since he finished runner-up in New York in 2014 — with an impressive 1-6, 6-4, 4-6, 6-1, 7-5 triumph over world number two and 2012 champion Murray. It was just his second win in nine matches with the Briton but he is happy chasing down deficits. Against Wawrinka, he trails 3-2 but won their last meeting in the Toronto semi-finals this summer. He also beat the 31-year-old in five sets in the quarter-finals of the US Open in 2014. "We just played in Toronto. He's been playing good tennis," said Nishikori who has a double target this weekend. He can become Asia's first Grand Slam men's singles champion while the title would net him a windfall of \$3.5 million. — AFP

JAPAN COACH GIVEN NEW 'TRANSLATOR' AFTER BAN



BANGKOK: This file photo taken on September 3, 2016 shows Japan's coach Vahid Halilhodzic (R) attending a team training session — AFP

TOKYO: Japan's under-fire football coach Vahid Halilhodzic has been handed an assistant to help him communicate with players after claims of a rift during their rocky World Cup qualifying campaign, reports said yesterday. There were calls for the Franco-Bosnian's head after last week's embarrassing 2-1 home defeat by the United Arab Emirates—and Halilhodzic did little to help his cause after the game by banning his players from smiling, according to Japanese media.

Tuesday's 2-0 win in Thailand soothed fears Japan could fail to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, and may have saved Halilhodzic's job. But the Japan Football Association (JFA) have now turned to

Olympic coach Makoto Teguramori to offer back-up to the 63-year-old firebrand, the Nikkan Sports daily said. "We hope to be able to have him act as a go-between for the coach and players," JFA technical committee chief Akira Nishino was quoted as saying. "Vahid would also like that kind of support," he added. "They will meet and discuss the situation and we'll take it from there."

Halilhodzic will still be on thin ice when the Blue Samurai face Iraq at home on October 6, ahead of a daunting clash against Asian champions Australia in Melbourne five days later. He took charge of Japan in March last year after the JFA fired Mexican Javier Aguirre following their Asian Cup flop in Australia

and amid allegations of match-fixing dating back to a previous tenure in Spain. Halilhodzic, who previously worked in France where a satirical puppet show teased him with a character named "Coach Vahid", led Algeria to the knockout stages of the 2014 World Cup but has failed to inspire Japan, despite billing himself as "Mr Fix-it" on his appointment. The defeat to UAE in Saitama was particularly galling for Japan after the same opposition sent them crashing out of last year's Asian Cup in the quarter-finals. According to local media, Halilhodzic later issued a bizarre instruction to his players "not to be caught smiling", apparently wanting them to show contrition. — AFP