

FIFA head resigns amidst US-led campaign over bribery scandal

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Speaking from the organization's headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland, FIFA President Sepp Blatter announced his resignation Tuesday and called for an extraordinary congress to elect his successor. He will continue to serve as the president of the organization until an election can be held, which could happen at the earliest in December.

The announcement came only four days after Blatter had been reelected to a fifth consecutive term as the head of FIFA, the international football association, which has been shaken by the arrest of top officials on corruption charges.

Working with Swiss authorities, the US Justice Department has been engaged in an expanding bribery investigation of FIFA that resulted last week in the arrest of seven top FIFA officials in Switzerland. In total, 14 individuals have been charged with 47 counts of racketeering, fraud and money laundering related to football games in North and Central America as well as the Caribbean.

Blatter's resignation after more than 17 years at the head of FIFA is a major political event that has broad geopolitical implications. The US-led campaign against alleged corruption is motivated above all by Blatter's closer relations with Russia. The charges and ongoing investigations are being used to bring into question the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, which are scheduled to take place in Russia and Qatar.

Referring obliquely to the US campaign, Blatter said upon resigning, "FIFA needs a profound restructuring... Although the members of FIFA have given me the new mandate, this mandate does not seem to be supported by everybody in the world of football."

While it has given bank executives a free pass for a series of massive corruption scandals, the US is aggressively pursuing allegations against FIFA. The

New York Times cited anonymous US law enforcement officials Tuesday who reported that Blatter, who has not yet been charged with any crime, is now the direct target of a federal corruption investigation. The US is seeking to obtain the cooperation of already indicted officials to build its case against him.

It was also reported on Tuesday that US federal authorities suspect FIFA general secretary Jérôme Valcke, Blatter's chief lieutenant, of overseeing the payment of \$10 million in bribe money in 2008 to Jack Warner, a former vice president from Trinidad and Tobago. Warner is accused of taking the bribe for his vote in securing the 2010 World Cup for South Africa.

Valcke has yet to be charged with any crime by US or Swiss authorities and has denied authorizing the payment. Justice Department officials including Attorney General Loretta Lynch have indicated that more charges are impending. The FBI is currently investigating allegations of money laundering and tax evasion.

In addition, Swiss authorities are investigating the December 2010 ballot that awarded the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, respectively, to Russia and Qatar.

The United States had been in the bidding for the 2022 World Cup and had vigorously lobbied FIFA, with President Barack Obama hosting both Blatter and Warner for a well-publicized meeting in the Oval Office. The Justice Department's corruption investigation began not long after the US lost the 2010 ballot.

The growing corruption investigation is tied to efforts by the US to use the 2018 World Cup as a lever for placing political and economic pressure on Russia. The US is asserting the right to go after individuals anywhere in the world, deploying federal racketeering laws as a geopolitical weapon in an attempt to bring

entire countries to heel.

Blatter met with Russian President Putin earlier this year after Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko called for a boycott of the 2018 World Cup. He had reassured Putin that the event would go ahead regardless of US and EU sanctions.

There has also been a pressure campaign by a number of leading US politicians to try to convince Blatter and FIFA to move the World Cup out of Russia. Republican Senator John McCain sent a letter of FIFA calling on executive board members to oppose Blatter's bid for a fifth term due to his refusal to pull the World Cup from Russia. Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, himself indicted on corruption charges, told reporters he was "especially pleased" by the investigation of FIFA due to his concerns over the awarding of the World Cup to Russia.

The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) is holding an emergency meeting in Berlin on Friday to discuss the corruption scandal. The president of the UEFA, Michel Platini, one of the favorite candidates to take over as the head of FIFA, said that Blatter's decision to resign was "the right decision."

Platini called for a vote by his organization to decide on a possible boycott of the 2018 World Cup if it is still held in Russia.

Allen Hansen, the Danish member of the UEFA executive board has called for a boycott of the 2018 World Cup, with proposals for a rival tournament involving European and South American nations. Greg Dyke, chairman of the English Football Association, had indicated prior to Blatter's resignation that his country was also seriously considering boycotting the 2018 World Cup.

In addition to the campaign led by the US and European football association, there are indications that major corporate sponsors intensified the pressure on Blatter over the weekend.



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