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Zurich summit to resolve transfers row
By Mihir Bose (Filed: 17/01/2001)

THE dispute between FIFA and UEFA on how to reform the transfer system, which the European Commission say is illegal, is _likely to be resolved_ tomorrow by FIFA president Sepp Blatter and his UEFA counterpart, Lennart Johansson.

News of their meeting came as Kate Hoey, the Minister for Sport, told a Commons committee that the Government are determined to prevent any attempt by Europe to interfere in UK sport.

Although tomorrow's talks, at FIFA's headquarters in the hills overlooking Zurich, are being billed as a football High Noon, it is likely that a compromise will be found to avoid lurid talk of 'war' _and a UEFA breakaway_. This was the clear message emerging from a two-day emergency session of UEFA's executive in Nyon.

UEFA remain angry with FIFA _for sending a discussion paper to the EC_ on the transfer issue. The paper, headlined 'Proposals to amend FIFA's international transfer regulations', would allow players to leave a club in the middle of a contract by giving three months' notice and arguing that they did not agree with coaching tactics or sporting policies at the club.

UEFA's immediate response was to cancel a meeting with FIFA and the EC and demand that the document be withdrawn.

However, after yesterday's meeting the language was more moderate. UEFA maintain that the discussion document has undermined negotiations with the EC, created a split between Europe and the rest of the world and is "potentially damaging to European football". But there is little sign of the furious tone of the weekend.

Instead, Johansson and his chief executive, Gerard Aigner, will seek to persuade Blatter that he must extricate himself from the hole he has dug. The likely way out has already been offered by FIFA, who told UEFA that they were willing to withdraw the discussion document if it met with widespread opposition from "the football family". Tomorrow, Johansson and Aigner will insist that European football cannot accept such contracts for players and that negotiations with the EC must be on a more realistic basis.

While the two governing bodies battle over the future of transfers, the clubs
and the Premier League will get a briefing from Maurice Watkins, a director of Manchester United and legal adviser to UEFA. Unlike some hawks among the European leagues, Watkins discounts talk of a ‘war’ between UEFA and FIFA and is keen for the negotiations to restart.

One issue that unites UEFA and FIFA is the quest for a special exemption for sport from the Treaty of Rome. However, the British Government fear that such a move could actually enable the EC to interfere in sport.

Hoey, speaking to the European scrutiny select committee, made it clear that the Government are not in favour of creating an exemption for sport as this could undermine the power of sporting associations to make their own regulations. "It is my belief that sport should not be subject to undue interference by the Commission or national governments. Government - at whatever level - does not run sport and should not run sport."

FIFA back down in row over transfers
By Mihir Bose (Filed: 15/01/2001)

FIFA, the world governing body, have offered to withdraw their controversial proposal that _players could walk out in the middle of their contract_ because they did not agree with the tactics of their manager, or the sporting policies of their club.

_As revealed by The Daily Telegraph on Saturday_, this extraordinary proposal - described by Frank Clark, the vice-chairman of the League Managers' Association, as "surreal" - has led to a bitter row between FIFA and UEFA, Europe's governing body, over negotiations with the European Commission regarding the restructuring of the transfer system.

UEFA demanded that FIFA withdraw their proposals - which they had submitted unilaterally to the European Commission without consulting UEFA - by 10.30am yesterday morning and a meeting was held at UEFA headquarters in Nyon, Switzerland, with representatives of the 13 top professional leagues in Europe to discuss this extraordinary situation.

In the middle of this meeting a faxed letter from Michel Zen-Ruffinen, general secretary of FIFA, arrived addressed to Gerhard Aigner, chief executive of UEFA, offering to withdraw the proposal should the "majority of the football family" want this to be done.

However, this proposal has done little to mollify UEFA because, like the
document submitted to the European Commission, it is not clear what the letter means, in particular FIFA's reference to the "majority of the football family".

UEFA feel strongly that the transfer negotiations with the Commission essentially concern the European clubs and leagues and have little bearing on football in the rest of the world. Also, while the letter suggests FIFA are willing to compromise, last week's document is still lodged with the Commission. FIFA have said that it is a working paper and not an official document, but this has merely confused matters further.

A statement released by UEFA after the meeting said that it had been agreed that "no further meetings should be held with FIFA unless certain principles were now agreed".

UEFA will hold emergency executive meetings in Nyon this evening and tomorrow morning to try to make sure that the anger European football feels on this issue is recognised by FIFA.

Some of this anger was evident at yesterday's meeting and, to the delight of UEFA, even the representatives of the French professional league were critical of FIFA. FIFA have tried to canvass French support for their proposals - the French league have recently done a deal on players' rights with their union - but this has clearly not worked and at the meeting Phillipe Diallo, secretary of the French league, was critical of FIFA and their tactics.

UEFA's director of communication, Mike Lee, said: "There were some very serious concerns expressed at the meeting about the way FIFA have handled this issue. The UEFA executive will meet today to discuss plans to formulate the response of European football."