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Blatter warns France, Sarkozy not to interfere

By GRAHAM DUNBAR, AP Sports Writer *Jun 29, 10:01 am EDT*

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JOHANNESBURG (AP)—FIFA president Sepp Blatter warned French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Tuesday that his country's team risks suspension from global tournaments if he meddles in the running of the national soccer federation.

Blatter said Tuesday he was sending a "clear and clean message" to the French government and Sarkozy, who has said he would personally lead the investigation into Les Bleus' dismal showing at the World Cup.

The French soccer federation "can really rely on FIFA in case of political interference—even if it is at the presidential level," Blatter said. "France made an 'affaire d'etat' of football, but football remains in the hands of the federation."

FIFA rules demand that federations manage their affairs independently or face suspension from international soccer matches and business. Teams, referees and soccer officials can be barred from participating even if the federation is the innocent victim of government meddling.

A FIFA suspension could affect French clubs Marseille, Lyon and Auxerre competing in the Champions' League next season, and hamper preparations to organize the 2016 European Championship. France was awarded the hosting rights last month by European football body UEFA.

Sarkozy intervened after the team's performance on and off the field in South Africa heaped embarrassment on the nation.

The team, which won the 1998 World Cup and was runner-up four years ago, failed to win a game and players went on strike at training after forward Nicolas Anelka was sent home for insulting coach Raymond Domenech.

A parliamentary panel was scheduled later Tuesday to interview sports minister Roselyne Bachelot, who spoke to the team during the debacle.

Bachelot earlier said it was "inevitable" that French soccer federation Jean-Pierre Escalettes would resign. Escalettes, who won praise for leading the Euro 2016 bid campaign, announced his plan to quit shortly after and will be interviewed Wednesday with the outgoing Domenech in hearings at the National Assembly.

Blatter told reporters at a briefing that he regretted Escalettes' resignation,

and warned that France's status in world soccer would not prevent FIFA stepping in.

"Definitely, I can tell you that political interference will be dealt with by FIFA notwithstanding what kind of interference and what is the size of the country," Blatter said.

FIFA has punished soccer federations before.

Greece was European champion when it was suspended from world soccer for several days in 2006, Iraq served a suspension in 2008 and Ethiopia was kicked out of its qualifying group for the 2010 World Cup.

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