

Iran complains to FIVB after three players are denied US visas



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Sports Desk

The Iranian Volleyball Federation lodged a complaint to the sport's governing body, FIVB, after the United States Embassy in Ankara refused to issue visas for five members of the national team – including three players – ahead of the upcoming Volleyball Nations League.

Integral opposite spiker Amin Esmailnejad, Arman Salehi, and Esmail Mosafer as well as technical staff's Nima Dehpanah, and Hamzeh Fat'hi have been denied a US visa.

Iran is to visit Anaheim in the state of California for the final VNL preliminary round fixtures, starting July 4.

Behrouz Ataei's men will take on France, Bulgaria, and Argentina, before facing Cuba on July 9.

In a letter to the FIVB on Tuesday, Mohammadreza Davarzani, the chairman of the Iranian feder-

ation, called for "transparency from the Americans" over their decision.

Citing the FIVB competitions' regulations, Davarzani added that "every host country is bound to issue visas for all members of the participating teams without any kind of limitations."

The top sport official insisted that would be "impossible" for Iran to take part in the competition without the services of its star players Esmailnejad and Salehi, while expressing his country's readiness to host Week 3 of the event instead of the United States.

Iran will kick off its VNL campaign in Nagoya, Japan, with a game against the host on June 6.

Ataei's team will also play Poland, China, and Slovenia in Week 1.

The top seven of the 16-team table will join Poland for the VNL Finals, starting with the quarterfinals in the Polish city of Gdańsk on July 19.

Juve deducted 10 points after initial penalty revised



MARCO BERTORELLO/AFP

AFP – Juventus on Monday were given a 10-point deduction in Serie A after a revision of their initial 15-point penalty inflicted on the club over illicit transfer activity.

The new sanction, announced by the Italian Football Federation's (FIGC) appeals court, severely dents Juventus' hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League, pushing them out of the top four with two matches remaining this season.

Juventus have competed in Europe's elite competition in each of the past 11 seasons dating back to 2012.

In April, Italy's highest sporting court, the Sports Guarantee Board, revoked Juve's 15-point penalty inflicted by the FIGC's appeals court and sent the case for a new judgement.

It asked the appeals court to revise punishments handed down to the club and some key figures, including former vice-chairman Pavel Nedved who was acquitted on Monday. Juventus said they "reserve the right" to appeal the latest decision to the Sports Guarantee Board.

"While not ignoring the need for urgency, which Juventus has never shied away from during the proceedings, it is emphasised that these are facts that still have to be evaluated by a judge," the Turin giants said on Twitter.

Long bans given to former chairman Andrea Agnelli, ex-CEO Maurizio Arrivabene and sporting directors Federico Cherubini and Fabio Paratici were upheld in April. But Juventus' hopes that the points deduction would be completely cancelled were quashed on Monday.

Massimiliano Allegri's men, who were second in the top flight, fall to seventh in the table. Juve are now five points behind fourth-placed AC Milan and host the losing Champions League semi-finalists in their penultimate match of the campaign this weekend. Juve then visit Udinese in their final match of the season on June 4.

The 'Old Lady' had a chance to move within two points of Milan when they took on Empoli shortly after the points deduction was announced on Monday.

But they slipped to a surprising 4-1 defeat to cap a miserable day for the two-time European champions.

The decision by the FIGC and the result at Empoli also mean that Lazio, who replaced Juve in second place, have qualified for the Champions League group stage for the first time since 2020 and only the second time since 2007.

Juventus are also embroiled in criminal proceedings over their accounting practices with 12 current and former key club figures including Agnelli potentially facing trial.

Esteghlal seeking consolation in Hazfi Cup quest

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League giant Esteghlal will be hosting defending champion Nassaji Mazandaran in the Iranian Hazfi Cup semifinal today at Tehran's Azadi Stadium, with the home side looking for solace in a season overwhelmed by controversy and chaos on and off the pitch.

The game will be a third meeting between the two sides this season, after the Tehran-based Blues came out 3-1 winners at home in the league last September and then played to a 1-1 draw against the northern Iranian side in February.

Esteghlal beat second-tier club Pars Jonoubi Jam 1-0 – courtesy of a Saeed Mehri's extra time winner – for a last-four place, while Nassaji defeated Paykan 3-0 at the Vatan Stadium in April's quarterfinals.

The match comes a week after Esteghlal settled for a third-spot finish in the Iranian top-flight despite a 7-1 thrashing of Tractor on the final day of the season, while having to watch archrival Persepolis lift a sixth league trophy in seven years.

However, Esteghlal manager Ricardo Sa Pinto refused to congratulate the Reds on their triumph in the post-match press conference as the Portuguese believed his men "were most deserving" to win a second successive title.

"I have respect for Persepolis just as I have for Sepahan and the other teams in the league, but I think I can have my own opinion. I can't congratulate a team that didn't really deserve the title. We would

have been the champions if there were more justice in the games," Sa Pinto said, adding his team would have collected "10 to 12 more points", had it not been for "bad luck and major refereeing mistakes in some of our matches."

Still, many believe Esteghlal players and Sa Pinto deserve credit for staying in the title race until the penultimate round of league fixtures despite all the issues within the club hierarchy, which saw the chairman seat change hands twice.

The four-time Iranian league champion is also set to be withdrawn from the AFC Champions League for a second year running, after the club failed to adhere to the Asian football governing body's licensing regulations.

The winner of today's encounter will play either Persepolis or Havadar, which will square off in the other semifinal on Wednesday, meaning a third Tehran derby of the season is on the cards.

Esteghlal players have insisted in recent days that they will be eager to meet the newly-crowned league champion in the final showpiece as they would leap at the chance for revenge against their city rivals.

Enjoying a remarkable run of nine wins in 10 unbeaten games, Esteghlal was in flying heading into the derby in April – a game billed as a decider in the title run-in.

An Issa Al-e Kassir's second-half strike summed up a disappointing afternoon for Esteghlal, as

Persepolis won 1-0 to leapfrog Esteghlal and Sepahan on top of the table, while the Blues were held to a 1-1 draw against San'at Naft Abadan in the following game to have their title defense all but finished.

The majority of Esteghlal supporters are convinced that Sa Pinto can build on his men's dominant displays in the best part of the season – which saw them bag a league-best 52 goals – and a possible silverware in the Hazfi Cup ahead of next season.

To that end, Esteghlal will have to make sure no harm will be inflicted by today's opponent.



Esteghlal's Mehdi Qayedi celebrates a goal during a 7-1 win against Tractor at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on May 18, 2023.
PAYAM SANI/IRNA

Jokic leads Nuggets past LeBron's Lakers, into their first NBA Finals



Nuggets center Nikola Jokic (15) shoots during a victory over the Lakers in Game 4 of the NBA basketball Western Conference finals in Los Angeles, CA, US, on May 22, 2023.
NBA

Nikola Jokic is a player unlike almost anything the NBA has ever seen, and now he's taking his Denver Nuggets somewhere they've never been.

Jokic had 30 points, 14 rebounds and 13 assists, and the Nuggets advanced to the NBA Finals for the first time in team history Monday night, sweeping the Western Conference finals with a 113-111 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers.

Jamal Murray scored 25 points for the top-seeded Nuggets, who overcame LeBron James' 31-point first half and a 15-point halftime deficit with a tenacious finish in Game 4 to earn their first conference title in their 47 NBA seasons.

Jokic earned his eighth triple-double of the playoffs by the third quarter, breaking Wilt Chamberlain's 1967 NBA record for triple-doubles in a single postseason. The bulky Serbian center with a point guard's grace

also led the Nuggets' gritty defensive effort despite picking up his fifth foul midway through the fourth quarter.

Jokic didn't leave the floor for the final 33 minutes of Game 4 – and when Denver needed a big basket, Jokic delivered that as well. He muscled past Anthony Davis for the game's final points on a layup with 51 seconds to play.

"I think that's why playoffs are so nice and so interesting, because you don't care about how tired you are," Jokic said. "You don't care about minutes, fouls, shots, percentage. You just want to win a game. Some plays today we weren't playing good defense sometimes, (but) you can win it in every kind of possible way."

James finished with 40 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists after the highest-scoring postseason half of his career, but even the top scorer in NBA history couldn't keep the deep, dynamic Nuggets from their sixth consecutive vic-

tory overall.

James missed two tying shots in the final seconds, with Aaron Gordon getting official credit for blocking his tying try at the buzzer.

"Me and AD were just talking in the locker room (and) we came to the consensus this is one of the best teams, if not the best team, we've played together for all four years," James said of the Nuggets. "Just well-orchestrated, well put together. They have scoring. They have shooting. They have playmaking. They have smarts. They have length. They have depth. And one thing about their team, when you have a guy like Jokic, who as big as he is but also as cerebral as he is, you can't really make many mistakes versus a guy like that."

The loss ended seventh-seeded Los Angeles' incredible turnaround after starting the season 2-10 under new coach Darvin Ham.