



## TRYING TIMES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA FOOTBALL

Despite recent on-field successes, turmoil now continues to reign within the structure of football in Papua New Guinea, with divisions and disorganization presenting problems for football in the country for the near future.

### Promise and Problems

The hosting of the 2016 FIFA Womens U-20 World Cup and OFC Nations Cup in 2016 in Papua New Guinea had been seen as a show of confidence in football in the country, along with impressive performance from domestic and national sides in recent history. However internal strife, rebel leagues, unfulfilled seasons and personal squabbles have but football on uncertain ground.

The traditional top flight PNGFA FIFA backed league has run into troubles, with the championship season failing to be completed in 2017. Part of the blame for this was attributed to logistics, with the season start being delay due to the FIFA tournament being presented as a partial reason, along with issues of league payments with remaining teams. However the problems with Papua New Guinea football run much deeper.

### Politics at Play

The initial division seems to stem from the election of FIFA Senior Vice President & OFC President David Chung as President of the Papua New Guinea FA. His election is disputed, primarily by Hekari United President John Kapi Natto. The dispute arises from accusations that Chung has used FIFA funds to support his reelection. Also Natto has accused Chung of wrongly discounting 12 pro-Natto votes from the election process, to boost the Chung candidacy. However Chung issued a statement, representing the OFC to deny any accusations of wrong doing.



*OFC President Chung*

*"The PNGFA and its Electoral Committee believe that the Congress and the subsequent election was held in accordance with PNGFA Statutes.*

*The members who were suspended were subject to a clear and transparent process and were found not to be compliant to their member obligations in accordance with the PNGFA Statutes."*

"This was endorsed by FIFA and the High Court in Port Moresby following an application for an injunction by one of the suspended members where the High Court found they have no legal standing." added Chung.

### **Football Divisions**

Despite Chung clearing his name through official channels, this has failed to appease Natto supporters. As such Natto has taken 12 now suspended teams, including his own, and once OFC Champions League winners Hekari United, to his newly establish rival start up league, under the jurisdiction of the also newly founded FFPNG. Chung has tried to bring this league under the auspices of the FIFA backed PNGFA, but with dwindling team numbers, collapsing competitions in contrast to the relative success of the FFPNG run competition, the future looks challenging for Chung and the PNGFA.

The members of the FFPNG have offered a compromise to Chung, offering their support for a lifting of the suspensions and an official recognition of the FFPNG. If these demands are met, then the FFPNG could be willing to come back under the auspices of the official PNGFA. However with neither side seemingly wanting to cede ground, a split in national club competitions seem inevitable for the foreseeable future.



**John Kapi Natto**

### **Future at the International Level**

Despite the domestic problems, the position of Papua New Guinea football could be seen to be as prominent as ever. As mentioned, Papua New Guinea hosted the OFC Nations Cup and also FIFA Womens U-20 World Cup in 2016, bringing global footballing eyes to the country. The national side reached the final of the 2016 OFC championship. Also, as President of the OFC, David Chung has been appointed by FIFA President Gianni Infantino to a prominent position as Vice President withing FIFA, a position which Chung brings national pride to.

*"I take the PNG flag to every meeting and make*

*sure my colleagues know where I come from. I'm just say proud to carry the PNG flag around the world.*

*"This is for the first time in history of Oceania and the PNGFA to rise to this level. I'm just so proud to be a Papua New Guinean as I do this with pride,"*

However, this pride in representing Papua New Guinea encounters problems when dealing with the national side. Players from the currently unrecognized FFPNG are ineligible for selection for the national team, including those from the likes of Hekari United. While this causes selection problems for the national team, it can also be platform to show tension, such as an incident in May where police were called to a PNG training session after people from the FFPNG arrived to the training venue. Coach Flemming Serritslev explained the issues.

*"Some hooligans and officials from "Fake Football Federation" entered our pitch, entered out training, interrupted our training and we had to stop the training 45 minutes before schedule,"*

*Had to call the police to take care that everything went on in a good way – it's unbelievable what is going on in this country when it's about the national team.*

Serritslev adding – "Unfortunately, I have to say, there are a few people who does everything they can to destroy the work of the national team."

***Hekari United win 2010 OFC Champions League***

### **Future for Football in Papua New Guinea**

Despite the potential in Papua New Guinea football, primarily to follow on from a very near penalty loss in the final of the 2016 OFC Nations Cup, the division which currently exist can only cause problems. The FFPNG, currently controls the strongest domestic league and teams, with promises of long term development plans for football in the country. Either the PNG can re-assume control, or the FFPNG can emerge as the sole player in domestic football, the best option seems to be a cordial union of the two.

For the benefit of all those involved with the sport in PNG, this solution is best coming sooner rather than later to realize the full bright potential of the game there.