

SPORTSMAIL SPECIAL ON THE STORM THAT HAS STUNNED SOCCER



EXCLUSIVE
By ANDREW
JENNINGS

Americans probe Blatter henchman over 'bogus' visa

SPORTSMAIL'S exclusive revelations about the murky truth behind the men who run FIFA has been the talk of football since we exposed the corruption allegations over president Sepp Blatter's election.

Today, the attention turns to Blatter's chief lieutenant, Trinidad official Jack Warner, the man whose grip on football's CONCACAF region is causing increasing disquiet at all levels of the game — and who may soon find himself facing criminal charges.

FIFA vice-president Jack Warner is under investigation by the United States government for alleged involvement in visa racketeering.

Warner, a staunch ally of FIFA president Sepp Blatter, has become embroiled in the recent controversy over alleged corruption and financial mismanagement. He is now expected to be interviewed by special agents from the U.S. Immigration Service about a false invitation he supplied to help a fellow Caribbean football official gain entry to the States.

FIFA officials are furious at the possibility that Warner abused his position to do favours to buy power and influence in Caribbean football, and will demand that Blatter apologise to the American government and take strong action against his Trinidadian henchman.

Last week *Sportsmail* handed U.S. officials a dossier containing the letter Warner wrote on June 14, 1999, to enable Colin Aaron from Guyana to obtain a U.S. visa.

Warner gave Aaron the letter at the end of a regional tournament in Trinidad, where he had been a match official. The CONCACAF president wrote: 'I wish to congratulate you on your outstanding performance during the recently

Warner must have known

concluded Copa Caribe 99 Championship. I am pleased to inform you that you have been appointed to officiate at the FIFA Women's World Cup '99, which will be held in the United States of America from June 19 to July 10, 1999.'

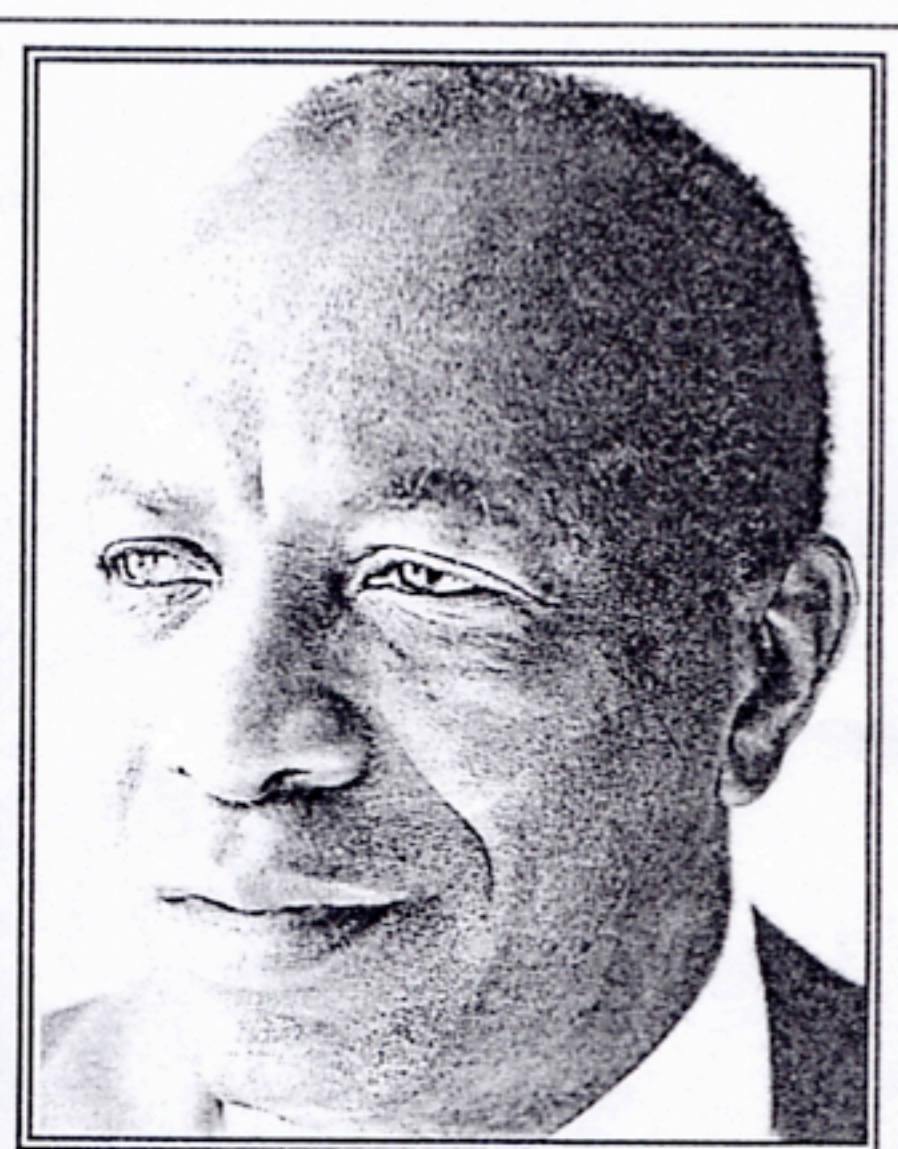
Aaron took the letter to the U.S. embassy in Guyana and was granted a visa. Immigration officials seemed unaware that FIFA had ruled six months earlier that all match officials at the Women's World Cup would be women, rendering Aaron ineligible by virtue of his gender.

Sportsmail has since been told that his name did not appear on any list of match officials.

Turkey's Senes Erzik, head of FIFA's referees' committee, told *Sportsmail* last night: 'It was exclusively FIFA female referees at the Women's World Cup. This was proposed by the referees' committee and unanimously agreed. FIFA's executive committee endorsed this decision — so Mr Warner must have known.'

In any event, Warner was deliberately exaggerating Aaron's competence. He is only an assistant referee and worked as a linesman, never controlling any of the Copa Caribe games.

It is hard to see why Warner would praise Aaron's 'outstanding



Under scrutiny: Blatter (left) and Warner (above), whose letter has aroused the interest of investigators in the United States

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performance', except to influence immigration officials.

The American investigators are concerned that the flaws in the letter were not spotted at their embassy in Guyana. They fear that, at a time of increased vigilance for terrorist suspects, there could be a corrupt official in the Guyana embassy endorsing false visa applications.

Sportsmail has passed the name of a possible suspect to U.S. investigators.

An alert visa official should have spotted that this letter of appointment was dated only five days before one of the biggest competitions in world soccer. It did not ask Aaron to confirm that he could immediately abandon work and family commitments, and rush off to spend nearly a

month in Los Angeles. There was no information about how FIFA would arrange his flight tickets.

A cursory check with FIFA would have revealed that all the prospective female officials had been notified two months beforehand and brought to Los Angeles three days before the tournament after being tested for skills and fitness.

In the letter, Warner told Aaron that he would be staying at the Century Plaza Hotel. In fact, only senior FIFA officials, such as Warner, stayed there. Match officials went elsewhere.

The women's tournament was controlled by FIFA, not CONCACAF. Warner had no role in selecting or notifying match officials. That was done by the FIFA committee chaired by Erzik, who added: 'The letters notifying the

female officials were written by FIFA general secretary Michel Zen-Ruffinen. They were not sent directly to the individual officials but went to the official's national association and were copied to their confederations.

'The formal letter of invitation sent by the general secretary congratulated them on their appointment, gave them information on how to obtain visas for America and how to get their tickets arranged by the FIFA office in Zurich. I find it incredible that Mr Warner could do this. When I have the evidence in my hands I will raise it at the executive committee.'

It is believed that Aaron used the visa to visit friends in New York. Yesterday he insisted that he had been at the women's tournament, but as an 'observer'.

An American diplomat told *Sportsmail*: 'As result of your dossier, we are launching an investigation into the visa department of our Guyana embassy.'

'Mr Warner may be stopped for questioning when he enters Miami for the CONCACAF congress (on April 20) and could be deported back to Trinidad. He may also be asked to come to the Trinidad embassy for questioning.'

The scandal may well jeopardise future visa applications from any officials or players from the CONCACAF region. Indeed, Warner, and the federation itself, could be blacklisted.

Women's soccer will be outraged at this cynical abuse of their game. But they are powerless to take action. In his election campaign four years ago, Blatter promised to make room for a woman member on his executive committee. Like many of his other pledges, it has been reneged on.

Warner's arrogance in writing the letter underlines that he believes himself untouchable. He knows that while he can deliver the 35-strong block of votes that Blatter depends on if he is to be re-elected at FIFA's congress in May, he can do as he pleases.

a.jennings@daily.co.uk