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## 'Egypt can easily host the World Cup'

Al-Ahram Weekly was granted an exclusive interview with FIFA President Joseph Blatter. In a one-hour, one-on-one at the home of FIFA in Zurich, soccer's supremo spoke to [Inas Mazhar](#)

Across the globe he is known as president of the International Football Federation, or FIFA. But Joseph S (Sepp) Blatter has another side and in the following interview, the most important man in world football allowed us into his own personal world.

Born on 10 March 1936 in the Swiss town of Visp, near the famed Matterhorn, Blatter has served FIFA for almost 35 years. He was an active footballer from 1948 to 1971 during which he played for the Swiss amateur league in the top division. He became a member of the board of Xamax Neuchâtel FC from 1970 to 1975, a member of the Panathlon Club, a society of sports managers, and has been a member of the Swiss Association of Sportswriters since 1956.

On 8 June 1998 Blatter succeeded João Havelange of Brazil as the eighth FIFA president.

"Now, it has been 35 years since I joined FIFA," Blatter recalls. "I started in February 1974. It was a dream to work in FIFA and in football because I am an economist by education, the University of Lausanne. Before joining FIFA, I was always working in the context of meeting people and where sport was involved. At the age of 12 I was already writing sports articles for newspapers. I started my real job in sports tourism, skiing, in the biggest skiing region in the country, then as secretary-general of the Ice Hockey Federation then a press officer at the Swiss Olympics. As director of Sports Timing and Public Relations, belonging to a Swiss watch company, I was involved in the organisation of the 1972 and 1976 Olympic Games."

That was when Blatter got his first taste of the international sports scene.

"In 1974," Blatter continues, "I was informed by one of my friends that there was opportunities in FIFA because they had a president, João Havelange, who had ideas but could not bring them to reality, so I

jumped in to join FIFA as director of Technical Development Programmes, but never with any ambition to become a FIFA president one day. I only wanted to work for football and in football. My first presentation was in Addis Ababa in February 1976 at the Congress of African Football which was held during the Africa Cup of Nations in Ethiopia. There, I realised how important football was to Africa and that football is not only about kicking a ball."

Blatter began to set Havelange's projects and ideas in motion. It was the time when ideas for competition and educational programmes were germinating and the foundations being laid for competition in the under-20 and under-17 categories as well as women's and indoor (futsal) football, all of which are pillars of FIFA's worldwide activity.

"Then, and by not even asking for it, I had the opportunity to become the FIFA secretary-general when the position became vacant. The executive committee offered me the job before the 1982 World Cup and I was very happy to take it.

"Taking the job, I started organising FIFA. There were 11 people working and I was number 12. President Havelange was almost an honorary president practically, working part time and travelling a lot. Now we are more than 300 people working at the home of FIFA in Zurich and over 400 all over the world. In 1990, I was promoted to CEO."

In March 1998, Havelange decided that at the age of 82 it was time for him to go. "I was happy to remain as secretary-general but there was a new approach in FIFA from Europe and Africa who had formed an alliance. Their candidate for president was Mr Johansson from Sweden. It wasn't a surprise but later they told me they didn't want me as a secretary-general and asked me to leave, saying they had other aspirations. But I wanted to continue working for football, so I told them that I would run for president. They laughed and said 'come on boy.' So I stood for president and was elected and here we are.

"Again, I repeat that it came by chance and I had no ambition for the seat. All I had wanted was to have a strong position to maintain my dreams and ambitious for the sport because I believed that 16 years as secretary-general taught me the value of football, the tool to develop the world in all aspects, socially and culturally."

Blatter, 73, was re-elected for a second term on 29 May 2002 in Seoul. And on 31 May 2007 he was confirmed, by acclamation, in the position

for a third term of office until 2011.

For Blatter, football means "basic education, character formation and fighting spirit, allied with respect and discipline". Reinforced by the message of fair play, this will all be instrumental in fostering a better understanding among all people around the world.

"Football is synonymous with theatre and entertainment and is hence an object of unequalled fascination for the media. It can even spark artistic creativity and, of course, creates many jobs. But it is above all an endless source of passion and joy. It's physical movement that simultaneously moves the emotions. It is the most popular and talked-about game in the world."

That's why Blatter's motto is "Football for all, all for football".

In the world's less privileged areas football is able to inspire hope and the promise of social advancement. Accordingly, Blatter intends to ensure that football makes a valuable contribution towards improving public health standards by means of relevant technical and scientific research.

The immense success of football has made it a magnet for a host of economic interest groups. The FIFA president is nevertheless determined to safeguard the game's human face. Maintaining a sound balance between the manifold facets of football is what he describes as "a constant challenge and at the same time my main objective."

Unlike former presidents, Blatter has been committed to a wide range of humanitarian projects since he believes that football bears a responsibility to society. He was the driving force behind a partnership with SOS Children's Villages that started in 1994. The organisation maintains more than 130 villages for children throughout the world and benefits from FIFA's financial and material support.

When he was elected FIFA president in 1998 Blatter formed an alliance with the United Nations children's organisation UNICEF and co-launched the campaign Pure Hope, Pure Football, before embarking on the most recent campaign in collaboration with UNICEF on 20 November last year. Say Yes for Children, a campaign launched in the run-up to the World Cup, is a worldwide campaign which aims to increase awareness of children's rights. For the first time ever, the World Cup was dedicated to a humanitarian cause under the slogan Say Yes for Children.

Blatter also supported a joint project for Africa with the UN's health organisation, the WHO, called "Kick polio out of Africa". Blatter also lends aid to refugee camps by providing them with football equipment, and he and FIFA are very much committed to fighting child labour.

"Win Africa with Africa is another project aiming at helping the national leagues to be in a position to offer decent conditions for African footballers to live in and with football and not have the idea to go and play in Europe because you have thousands who play in Europe but how many play in big clubs? So it is better for them to stay there where they belong, in Africa. It means the players shall stay in their environment and try not to go in some sort of expedition where you don't know how it finishes."

In addition to the many projects taking place in Africa, the last year 2009 and this year, according to Blatter, are the years of Africa which he described as a love affair.

But, after the 2010 World Cup is over in South Africa in July, will this love affair come to an end?

" No, of course not, because it is a real love affair and a real love affair should never come to an end, at least with our new development projects in Africa and where the governments are taking part."

When speaking about Africa and its developing projects, one must take the opportunity to ask the FIFA president about his impressions so far about the Africa Cup of Nations being played in Angola. "I'm following it but not too closely. I had the chance to watch two matches in Group A -- the Algeria vs Angola match and Mali against Malawi. Angola and Algeria played a non-match. They were playing in order not to lose and to just secure their qualification to the quarter-finals. It wasn't the best of African football.

"I was so happy watching Mali when they were 4-0 down to Angola and how they came from behind in four or five minutes, but this is football. There are no more big teams. Everybody can beat anybody and this is the effort.

"I've also watched Egypt playing and for me they are the favourites to win this tournament. They have a very good coach, Mr Hassan Shehata. He's very knowledgeable in football, very wise, a big experience and great personality."

Like everybody else, Blatter was shocked by the attack on the Togolese players before the start of the competition.

"Normally in competitions, security is always the matter of the state. Football can't ensure any security. But, it should take the elementary precautions with the authorities, police or military. We can't have any competition without having these security precautions and in this case, it is the matter of the government of Angola.

"It is known to everyone that the attack was identified as a terrorist attack for political reasons. How can we avoid it? But, it is a must to protect the national teams. I don't know the details. That's why it's difficult to attribute responsibility but it is a great shock for me because it reminded me of the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich when the Palestinian Fatah attacked the Israeli team. It was the only time there was an attack against a sports team being taken as a hostage for a political reason, and the cricket team last year in Sri Lanka. I'm shocked because I was also of the opinion that football is a game for everybody so everyone should respect football and it should never be used as a platform for any political or non-political activity.

"There is nothing to say about the withdrawal of Togo. They were naturally in shock. I said it would have been better to play but it was a political decision and the important thing was that the competition had gone on and also continued in Cabinda."

Blatter has been irritated by reports questioning security concerns in South Africa in the wake of the Cabinda shooting. "It is nonsense," he said. "There are no concerns regarding security in South Africa whose authorities have shown the best during the Confederations Cup and other events. South Africa has every year 11 million tourists and they are safe. Naturally there are regions and cities that you can't go alone, but it is the same when you travel to other parts of the world like in New York, London or Paris. You don't go everywhere; you must be a little bit careful.

"It is terrible for me to know that there is a bit of envy and jealousy that the World Cup has gone to South Africa and they say 'don't go to South Africa' and it is terrible to listen to that."

Disputes constantly erupt between Europe and Africa over the African European-based players who must leave their clubs in mid-season for around a month for the Africa Cup of Nations. There has been many calls urging a change in the timing of the tournament to summer or have

it every four years instead of the present two. But the African Confederation has steadfastly refused. Blatter told the *Weekly* his opinion and explains CAF's point of view.

"Well, I've spoken about this matter with Mr Eissa Hayatou, the CAF president several times. Being a bi-annual event could be tiring to the players especially in the year of the World Cup. The players play in European leagues, then travel to the Africa Cup of Nation, then go back to play in the European league and then join the national team for the World Cup a few months later. I suggested to Mr Hayatou that during that year, if they insist on having it every two years, they should hold an African championship which involves only the local players and not the professionals and that would solve the problem.

"However, I believe that CAF's initiative is a good one by playing every second year. According to Mr Hayatou, it helps in forcing every African country to build an infrastructure for football and by building infrastructure in the country. It is not only football stadiums but roads, hotels, telecommunications, transportation... etc, otherwise they will never have any stadiums in some countries. All other continents hold this event every four years. I don't know if Africa will change or not as long as it works well for them as it is now. Actually, I don't think it will change."

Concerning news about the complaints of Egypt and Algeria in the wake of their World Cup qualifying matches, who better to ask than Mr Blatter? "The disciplinary committee is still working on it but is not yet finished. I can't give information because the disciplinary committee is independent. But we can't be working during the Africa tournament when both countries are playing so we will deal with it in February.

"Investigations are going on; there will be hearings from both sides like it is in a court. When the decision is taken, the parties will be informed. If they are not happy, both parties can go to FIFA's Board of Appeals and if they are still not happy they can go to the Court of Sports Arbitration, but the Executive Committee members or myself, we have nothing to do with the decision."

Blatter revealed that when the Egyptian delegation met him in November, they did not discuss the case. The Egyptian delegation comprised EFA President Samir Zaher, vice president and FIFA Executive Committee member Hani Abu Rida and Amr Wahbi, EFA marketing director and security officer.

"They met me just as I met later with the president of the Algeria Federation because this is my responsibility to meet with the presidents of the federations even if they have a case against each other. But we didn't speak about this case. They were very disappointed but I said 'I'm sorry, I'm not a disciplinary committee member'. All I can say about that is that there will be a very proper hearing with the disciplinary committee and testimonies will be heard and decisions will be taken."

Blatter said he had great expectations for Abu Rida, the newest member of FIFA's all-powerful Executive Committee. "He is a businessman and it is important to have people among you who have another approach other than football, people who can understand other aspects of life with good mentality, marketing, economics experience as well as experience in security issues, footballers and administrators. We have a *mélange* now. I believe he will bring good life to the Executive Committee. Not only will he defend Egypt and Africa in FIFA but he is expected also to defend world football."

On Egypt, Blatter said it was another African country capable of hosting a Congress meeting, Executive Committee meetings and even the World Cup. "Egypt can one day host the big event, the World Cup. In 1997, we held the Executive Committee meeting in Egypt and it is another country in Africa which can easily organise a World Cup. Have you seen how they have managed to organise the U20 World Cup. It went on so smoothly with no problems. Everybody was happy."

"Egypt is such a cultured and big country. Even in primary school in my mountain schools when you speak about cultured and historical countries, you study Egypt."

Broadcasting TV rights has become a major concern of football lovers around the world. Blatter has always said that football is for the people and that it is their right to watch at least four World Cup matches on their public TV: the opening, two semi- finals and the final.

"I know there were problems with every World Cup and I heard about the case of the Africa Cup of Nations in the North Africa region. But I confirm that the world will watch these matches on free TV in countries where we have contracts with some stations who offer these matches for free TV and with most of the countries, we have these contracts."

"As for the countries who are taking part in the World Cup, the people will have the chance to watch all their team's matches in the World Cup in addition to these four matches. We are in Africa now and are offering

a free signal to some countries. Everybody who has a TV set can see not only his matches, but also all the other matches."

Referees and their mistakes remain another problem for FIFA. Their errors threaten the beautiful game but according to Blatter "there is no justice in football. Justice must be replaced by fair play, by accepting that human beings can make mistakes. But what we have to do is educate referees and bring them to a professional level where they make less mistakes.

"But they will still always make mistakes. This is football. It is impossible to have it error-free and if you take away all mistakes and stop the match and go to a monitor to check, then you are taking away the essence of the game. Football is a human game and human beings make mistakes -- players, coaches so why not referees?"

Blatter affirmed that refereeing mistakes will not force FIFA to use video evidence, but there is another solution.

"Video evidence, no, but goal line technology, yes. By March we will have the International Football Association board meeting and we will discuss that.

"Additional referees have proven that there will be less foul play but in critical situations they can't say more. If there are too many players they might not be able to see clearly."

The public and the media thought the FIFA disciplinary committee should have taken action against Thierry Henry for his famous handball against Ireland."If all errors by players or referees are to be analysed by the disciplinary committee, we should have about 10 different committees sitting there everyday because referees commit errors that later produce a goal. The Thierry Henry goal didn't decide the match. There was still 17 minutes to go. The Irish could have still scored or even scored a goal in the first match at home. They lost at home 1-0. That's football."

Because of football, Blatter hardly finds time for himself. His life is all about football. He is a football man, but isn't there a family man?

"As a person, I like movies and theatre but I have very little time to go out to the cinema or theatres, so I watch at home. I like crime movies. But I don't like the new American approach of movies that only uses machine guns... but when there is a story behind. I also like to read and

am fond of information.

"When I'm in Zurich I start my day very early, before 6am. After a little movement to remind my body that I can't remain asleep, I listen to the Swiss radio in German and then in French because they don't have the same news. Then I check the TV teletext and then go to the office, open the computer, read the news and three or four newspapers on my desk. By seven I'm aware of a lot of information about the world around me. Then my media assistant prepares an overview of media, not only in football but also what is happening in the world.

"I have a family in the valley in the southern part of Switzerland, a daughter. She was involved in football, worked in Australia and the 2000 Olympic Games. Her husband is involved in handball. I was married once, but I guess my wife wasn't happy with this life. I can't serve two families -- the FIFA family and another family. You can say I'm married to FIFA."

Since the bond between FIFA and Blatter is so strong, he might be thinking of a fourth term as FIFA president. "This question is always in the air. People say you are foolish to run again, you should relax now. But I can't relax as long as I feel that my mission is not yet finished and we have haven't yet reached this point of the integration of our game in the society, by touching the society and preparing a better world. I'm not speaking about peace, but a better world of understanding, integration.

"If I'm still wanted by the congress and God will give me health I will go, but if the congress says no, then I will say 'thank you.'"

Rumours have it that the president of the Asian Confederation, Qatar's Mohamed Ben Hammam, is thinking of running for the presidency.

"Everybody can be a candidate. With Mohamed, we had a wonderful time together as friends up to the last congress in May. All of a sudden our friendship was broken; ask him why. I don't know but we are still working together because he is still the president of a big confederation, the confederation of Asia and still a member of the Executive Committee and if there are other candidates, it is okay and then we will see what will happen."