

A ceremony to mark the 54th anniversary of the death of legendary Iranian wrestler Gholamreza Takhti took place by his grave in Shahr-e Rey, southern Tehran Province, Iran, on Friday.

Iranian clubs Persepolis, Esteghlal omitted from 2022 AFC Champions League

Sports Desk

Iranian football was hit with shocking news on Friday as Persian Gulf Pro League giants Persepolis and Esteghlal were omitted from the 2022 AFC Champions League.

The decision by the Asian football governing body's independent Entry Control Body (ECB) to withdraw the licenses of the Tehran-based archrivals – as well as Gol Gohar Sirjan – came "pursuant to articles 14.4 and 14.5 of the AFC Club Licensing Regulations", wrote the AFC's official website.

"Persepolis FC, Esteghlal FC and Gol Gohar Sirjan FC have now been declared ineligible to participate in the 2022 AFC Champions League," wrote the AFC.com, after the three clubs failed to meet "all of the mandatory criteria (as required under articles 3.1 and 3.2(a) of the AFC Club Licensing Regulations)."

"The case file of these proceedings is referred to the secretariat of the AFC Disciplinary and Ethics Committee for their further investigation and action (if considered appropriate)," added a media release by the AFC.

Darius Mostafavi, the Iranian head of the Professional Licensing Appeals Committee, had underlined "the governmental ownership of Persepolis and Esteghlal, as well as their debts to former players and coaches," as the main reasons behind the AFC's decision.

The AFC had issued a petition to the ECB,

calling for the omission of the three clubs, as they were given five days – until December 27 – to provide the AFC body with the required documentations.

Persepolis – Iranian champion for the past five seasons and an ACL finalist in 2018 and 2020 – had been handed a place in the west zone group stage of the Asian elite clubs' competition, kicking off in May, while Esteghlal, which finished third in the Iranian league last term, had been given a playoff spot.

Foolad Khuzestan – Iran's Hazfi Cup champion – are also guaranteed a group spot, while league runner-up Sepahan will have to secure its group place through the playoffs in April.



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Paris Olympics 'top priority' for new Iran taekwondo chief Saei



taekwondo.ir

Sports Desk

New president of Iran Taekwondo Federation Hadi Saei said a successful campaign at the 2024 Paris Olympics will be "a top priority" for his federation.

A tight election race on Wednesday saw Saei, a former member of the City Council of Tehran, claim 29 of the votes – against Mohammad Pouladgar's 27 – to bring an end to his rival's 21-year reign in the federation.

Saei, the most decorated Iranian in the history of the Olympic Games, was full of praise for predecessor, adding, "All of my medals were a result of his efforts and management in the federation."

"I will be looking to bring the Iranian taekwondo family back together," added Saei upon his appointment, who also underlined a triumphant participation at the Paris Games – in two-and-a-half years' time – as a main goal for the Iranian federation.

"Our top priority will be a successful performance in Paris though we're already short of time in planning for the Games. The Olympic quotas will be decided through a ranking system and our athletes will have to participate in different com-

petitions to collect the required points," Saei told reporters.

"My federation is aiming to form an under-23 national team to provide backup to the seniors' squad in the coming years," said Saei, who had stepped down from his role as the technical director of the federation in April – days after a quarrel in the Iranian taekwondo league with the competition's secretary.

"We also enjoy high potentials in the female youth ranks – as the Rio 2016 Games indicated – and I believe the Iranian taekwondo is capable of achieving even more in the women's competitions. We will be seeking to secure at least two women's berths for the Olympics," added the new taekwondo chief, offering his full-fledged support for the Iranian women in the sport.

Saei, 45, made history at the Sydney 2000 Games as his 68kg bronze was a first-ever Olympic medal in the sport for Iran.

His Sydney success was followed by back-to-back golds at Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008, making him one of only two Iranians to have won the ultimate prize at the Games on two occasions – alongside weightlifter Hossein Rezaeadeh.

Djokovic not held 'captive', free to leave whenever he chooses, Australia says

Australia's home affairs minister has dismissed any suggestion Novak Djokovic is being held "captive" in a Melbourne hotel, declaring the world No 1 is free to leave the country whenever he chooses.

Djokovic is being held in an immigration court until Monday when he will challenge in court the federal government's Thursday decision to cancel his visa, the Guardian reported.

The home affairs minister, Karen Andrews, said on Friday that other international players and officials who had already been allowed into the country on a similar vaccine exemption to Djokovic were being investigated by border force officials.

She rejected accusations from the Serb star's family that the Australian government was "keeping him in captivity".

It is believed – although not confirmed – that Djokovic was granted an exemption to play at the Australian Open based on him having previously contracted COVID-19.

"I can confirm people who contracted COVID-19 within the past six months and seek to enter Australia from overseas, and have not received two doses of a TGA-approved vaccine or TGA-recognised vaccine, are not considered fully vaccinated," the federal health minister wrote to the Tennis Australia boss, Craig Tiley.

Tiley and the sport's governing body in Australia declined multiple requests for comment on Friday.

Andrews, however, confirmed the Australian Border Force, which she oversees, was looking at other individuals who have travelled in similar cir-

cumstances to Djokovic for entry to Australia."

The Victorian government sought to distance itself from the debacle by claiming visa approval was the commonwealth's responsibility and it had not been told about the letters to Tennis Australia from the federal health minister and, subsequently, his department.

"I'm advised that members of the Victorian government hadn't seen that correspondence," the state's acting premier, Jacinta Allan, said.

"We wouldn't necessarily see it ... but it reinforces that point that it is the commonwealth government ... that's responsible for issuing visas and how they engage in that dialogue with Tennis Australia is a matter for them."

The world No 1 faces another two days in the Park Hotel alongside refugees and asylum seekers. He is waiting for a hearing in the federal circuit court on Monday which will determine whether he can defend the Australian crown he's won nine times.

Meanwhile the outcry in Serbia over the treatment of Djokovic is growing with protests in Belgrade. His father, Srđjan, promised a rally would be held every day until Djokovic was released.

Australia's ambassador in Belgrade, Daniel Emery, was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and urged to make personal efforts to assist Djokovic. The ministry said Australia had acted in bad faith towards the tennis star.

"The Serbian public has a strong impression that Djokovic is a victim of a political game against his will and that he was lured to travel to Australia in order to be humiliated," it said in a statement.

"Novak Djokovic is not a criminal, terrorist or illegal migrant, but he was treated that way by the Australian authorities."

Former Davis Cup player Paul McNamee, the Australian Open tournament director from 1995 until 2006, argued the 34-year-old deserved his day on the court – not in court.

"It's not fair. The guy played by the rules. He got his visa, he arrives, he's a nine-time champion and whether people like it or not he's entitled to fair play," McNamee told the ABC.

Australian tennis player Nick Kyrgios tweeted: "How we are handling Novak's situation is bad, really bad. Like these memes, headlines, this is one of our great champions but at the end of the day, he is human. Do better."

Coutinho signs for Aston Villa on loan from Barcelona



ALEX CAPARROSSI/GETTY IMAGES

Premier League club Aston Villa have agreed a deal to bring in former Liverpool playmaker Philippe Coutinho on loan from Barcelona until the end of the season.

The deal, which is subject to a medical and a work permit being granted, includes an option to buy the 29-year-old Brazil international, BBC Sport reported.

Coutinho joined Barcelona in a £142m move from Liverpool in January 2018.

However, he has not had the expected impact and Barca are keen to move him on to lighten their wage bill. The playmaker, who has scored 26 goals in 106 appearances for the Catalans, has 18

months to run on his Nou Camp contract, which expires at the end of the 2022-23 season.

His move reunites him with Villa manager Steven Gerrard, who was his captain at Liverpool.

Gerrard, who described his former teammate as a "special footballer" on Thursday, and Coutinho were key parts of the Liverpool side who fell just short of winning the Premier League title in 2014.

Coutinho scored 41 Premier League in 152 appearances for Liverpool, who he joined in a £8.5m move from Inter Milan in January 2013.



KAI PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS

"Djokovic is not being held captive in Australia," Andrews told the national broadcaster ABC. "He is free to leave [the country] at any time that he chooses to do so and border force will actually facilitate that."

The Victorian state government on Friday said it had not seen correspondence between the federal government and Tennis Australia in late November that stipulated unvaccinated players could not enter the country on the basis they had previously been infected with COVID-19.

Andrews could not say how many players were being investigated, adding anyone entering Australia had to show evidence of their vaccination or medical reasons why they were not vaccinated.

"I know there is a lot of chatter about the visa. The visa, on my understanding, is not the issue, it is the entry requirement," she said. "Border force has been very clear that he [Djokovic] was not able to meet the requirement to provide the evi-