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North Mariana exit weakens Oceania Football Confederation

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The Oceania Football Confederation, one of FIFA's smallest regional confederations, could be weakened by the exit of more members as chaos surrounds the status of Commonwealth of North Mariana Islands (CNMI).

Australia, the OFC's biggest member and only potential world cup host, left in 2006 for the rival Asian Football Confederation and the CNMI is set to follow suit.

OFC secretary Tai Nicholas told PTG: "We have received a request from them that they wish to resign from OFC and become a member of AFC.

"In accordance with the OFC Statutes, only the congress can approve this request and our next OFC congress is 1 June 2009. Once the OFC congress approves Northern Marianas to resign (sic) only then are they free to then apply to the Asian Football Confederation."

The OFC is convinced that the CNMI - a group of North Pacific islands with a 90,000 population - is an associate member but the North Marianas Islands FA was accepted as a subsidiary of the AFC in December 2006.

Only last month, North Mariana played in the preliminary round of the East Asian Football Championship (EAFF) in Guam.

The Japanese FA – a member of the AFC - supplied North Mariana with a coach, Sugao Kanbe but his team lost all three matches against the hosts, Macau and Mongolia.

The EAFF is a subsidiary of the AFC and the North Mariana Islands FA turned to the body after initial overtures to the OFC received no response.

"We wrote correspondence to Oceania numerous times and never got any response," said Peter Coleman, a US attorney, who set up the North Mariana Islands FA in 2005 and became secretary after being posted to Saipan, the biggest islands in the CNMI.

"When I organized the league [in North Mariana] there had been many years without any formally organized football on the island; therefore, [I am] not sure where Oceania gets their information about any association our commonwealth may have had in the past."

The North Mariana Islands FA has since undergone a number of staff changes but one former member said: "Apparently, FIFA had a bird when they found out just before the [EAFF 2010 qualifying] tournament that a non-FIFA nation [was] competing."

The episode illustrates the difficulty that FIFA has in controlling membership in its six regional confederations spread across the globe.

Following Australia's withdrawal, the OFC only has 11 full members: American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tahiti, Tonga and Vanuatu.

Both rugby codes are more popular than football in many parts of Oceania and the OFC plays a vital role in developing the game in isolated territories but the grouping is FIFA's weakest confederation with little prospect of being strengthened by new members.

At a congress in Tahiti in November 2006, Kiribati and Tuvalu joined Oceania as associate members. Football representatives from the Federated States of Micronesia also attended that congress but did not join.

To join FIFA and get the USD 1 million available every four years available to members of the world body, countries must first be full members of a regional confederation and Mr Nicholas adds: "At present the associate members don't satisfy the criteria for full FIFA membership."

Once North Mariana go, the OFC will only have three associate members and that number could even drop further. The OFC's other associate member is Niue Island, a tiny New Zealand administered Pacific atoll with a population of only 5,000.

"Niue has been associate members since the early 90's but they are too small that they will never be able to satisfy FIFA membership requirements and they will always be an associate member," adds Mr Nicholas. "In fact recently it is noted there is no football development and we may therefore take them off our membership register."

Another OFC associate, Tuvalu – a scattering of islands with only 10 square miles of land and a population of 12,000 – managed to send a team to the 2007 South Pacific Games. The tournament was used by FIFA as the first round of Oceania qualifiers for the 2010 world cup, which put the Tuvalu team in the bizarre situation of trying to qualify for a tournament they were not officially eligible for.

Not unlike North Mariana and the 2010 EAFF championship.

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