

Lebanon's sectarian tensions spill into basketball

BEIRUT (AP) — Even when it comes to basketball, no one in Lebanon seems to forget who worships in a mosque and who prays in a church.

Only three weeks after it started, the Middle Eastern country's basketball league was postponed indefinitely as Beirut's two rival teams — one backed by Christian politicians, the other by Muslims — fight over who has control of Lebanon's most popular game.

The controversy between the Christian-backed Sagesse club and Sunni Muslim-supported Riyadi is yet another sign of how the religious and sectarian tensions that have bedeviled the country for decades still have the power to paralyze Lebanese society.

The latest feud erupted three weeks into the season, which already had been delayed twice because of political interference as both teams pour millions of dollars into new players and coaches. Elections for the federation's board led to more political disputes and canceled play all together last week.

"It's typical Lebanon. Basketball federation is just like the government," said Elie Mechantaf, the president of Sagesse and a retired player. "We have election, and the side that does not like the result decides to boycott. Shame on us, really."

The season, in which eight-time champion Sagesse was expected to once again challenge Riyadi for the league title, appeared doomed before it even started.

A car bomb ripped through a Christian neighborhood a day before Sagesse planned to throw a lavish party to unveil the new squad with several prized players, including Lebanese-American twins Charles and Philip Tabet and Lebanese-Australian player Julian Khazzouh. The league was postponed for a week out of respect for the victims of the bombing, which killed Lebanon's top security official in the Christian district in east Beirut on Oct. 19.

The season was further delayed because several squads in the 10-team league refused to play against Sagesse because they signed Khazzouh, who had previously played basketball in Israel.

Lebanese law prohibits anyone who's worked in Israel from obtaining a work permit in Lebanon, a country at war with the Jewish state. But a military court eventually cleared Khazzouh of any wrongdoing, saying that the law does not apply to the former Sydney Kings center, who was an Australian citizen when he played for Israeli club Ramat Gan during the 2009-10 season.

The 26-year-old Khazzouh, whose deceased father was Lebanese, became a Lebanese citizen last month. After missing two games, Khazzouh was allowed to play in the country for the first time on Nov. 16, when Sagesse hosted Riyadi and beat its archrival 74-66.

Soon after, sectarian tensions among the country's politicians that devastated the nation during years of civil war spilled over into the basketball arena, suspending play indefinitely last week and leaving the newly elected leadership of the sport's federation at a loss for ways to resume.

"We have a big problem now, because they are mixing politics and religion with basketball," Mechantaf said.

He said Riyadi and four other teams are refusing to play league games because they do not like the makeup of the federation's 15-member board that was elected Friday.

Tammam Jaroudi, a member of the Riyadi board, says the Christian politicians bankrolling Sagesse manipulated the federation's election to continue holding a monopoly on the running of the sport.

"They are using the game of basketball to pit Christians against Muslims again," said Jaroudi, who is also a son of Riyadi's longtime president, Hisham Jaroudi. "It's extremely dangerous in Lebanon. We are always on the edge here, so we are afraid it could lead to another war."

Sectarian sensitivities still prevail in Lebanon, more than two decades after the end of the 1975-90 civil war between Christians and Muslims that killed 150,000 people. Basketball games often resemble tense political gatherings, with Lebanese soldiers separating rival fans, chanting politically and religiously charged slogans.

Lebanon's population of 4 million is divided between 18 sects, including Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Christians and Druze, and every community is sensitive to anything that could tip the balance of power in a country with a grim history of sectarian strife.

After the war ended in 1990, national reconciliation was based on an agreement dividing seats in the National Assembly and Cabinet along sectarian lines. Muslims make up an estimated 55 percent of the population and Christians 45 percent. The divisions within the two communities give neither group a majority to rule, leaving the elected governments and the country's sports federations in a state of constant paralysis.

Lebanon's basketball league was established a year after the end of the war. It thrived during the 1990s, with Christian and Muslim politicians pouring money into the clubs, encouraging their sect to rally behind basketball teams instead of armed militias.

"This Muslim against Christian thing came from the war and went into basketball," said Ghassan Nakcor, a 30-year-old Sagesse supporter. "It's what makes the fans support one team against another.

"They come to watch Christians beat Muslims and Muslims beat Christians, and not because they care about basketball. This is Lebanon."

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