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Lebanon still eyeing World Cup berth after rigging scandal



After a tumultuous period during which a match fixing scandal involving some of his players left him pondering his future, Lebanon coach Theo Bucker is back focusing on securing the country's first World Cup finals berth. Last month, the German coach said he had been left 'broken' after 24 players were punished for fixing international and club matches by the Lebanese Football Association. FIFA praised the Lebanese FA for their efforts and it appears unlikely that the side will be punished despite the rigging involving their national team. Bucker's men returned to the field to face Thailand in an Asian Cup qualifier on Friday and swept aside the Southeast Asians 5-2 in Beirut in their first competitive fixture since the revelations. Next up is a World Cup qualifier away to Group A leaders Uzbekistan on Tuesday where the home side, who have eight points from five matches, are heavy favorites to claim the three points and move closer to tying up one of the two places on offer from the five-team pool. Lebanon are at the bottom on four points, three behind Qatar, Iran and second placed South Korea, who have only played four games in comparison to the West Asian's five, but Bucker refuses to give up hope on a first finals appearance for the 'Cedars'. The third placed finisher in the group will face off over two legs against the equivalent placed side from Group B with the winner advancing to an intercontinental playoff against a South American team for a place in Brazil. "Honestly, a draw would be a perfect result," Bucker told Lebanese paper the Daily Star on Monday of his ambitions from the Tashkent trip. "If we finish third, then who will we play in the next match (playoff tie with Group B)? Oman, Jordan? "OK, let's say we win that, then we have to play either Chile, Paraguay or Uruguay in the final playoff." After Tuesday's clash, Lebanon host South Korea on June 4 before their final group game away to Iran a week later. A third-place finish looks like a tall order for Bucker's side, but they managed to shock the Koreans 2-1 in Beirut in the previous round of qualifiers and after overcoming the match fixing scandal, anything will seem possible. The German, though, knows where improvements must come. "Our weakness is in the midfield. We don't have players who can maintain the same intensity for 90 minutes," he said after the win over the Thais. "We are losing the aerial balls in ... the battle for the second ball and creative passing must be converted into high levels of fitness."