

After Prosecutors Open Inquiry Into Soccer Chief, He Is Asked to Resign

Luis Rubiales caused outrage for kissing a player after Spain won the Women's World Cup. On Monday, a criminal investigation was begun, and he was told to step down.

By Rachel Chaundler and Jason Horowitz

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Spanish prosecutors said on Monday that they had opened an investigation into whether Luis Rubiales, the president of the country's soccer federation, could be charged with committing an act of sexual aggression after he kissed one of the female team's players on the lips when they won the World Cup this month.

Then late Monday night, after nearly six hours of intense discussions at an emergency meeting, the Spanish soccer federation issued a statement requesting that Mr. Rubiales "immediately present his resignation as president of the Royal Spanish Football Federation," citing "the latest events and the unacceptable behaviors that have seriously damaged the image of Spanish football."

Mr. Rubiales, 46, was shown on video after the World Cup final in Sydney on Aug. 20 kissing one of the team's star players, Jennifer Hermoso. Although he apologized the day after, he took a defiant stand later in the week, saying Ms. Hermoso had lifted him off his feet and "moved me close to her body." He has accused his critics of "false feminism," saying he was the victim of "social assassination" and insisting that Ms. Hermoso had initiated the exchange.

Ms. Hermoso countered in a statement, "At no time did I consent to the kiss that he gave me."

Opposition has steadily grown in response to Mr. Rubiales's conduct and his strident defense of it, and the group he heads, known formally as Royal Spanish Football Federation, had found itself under increasing pressure to take action.

The kiss has also come to embody the generational and cultural fault line between traditions of machismo and more recent progressivism that has put Spain in the European vanguard on issues of feminism and equality. Some commentators have

taken to calling it Spain's #MeToo moment.

On Monday afternoon, public prosecutors at Spain's National Court opened pretrial investigative proceedings against Mr. Rubiales to determine if there were sufficient evidence to take action against him for sexual assault, a crime punishable by one to four years in prison. According to Spanish law, nonconsensual "kisses on the mouth" are a reason for assessing whether there has been "an attack against sexual freedom."

The prosecutor's office has received several complaints about the kiss from individuals and groups, the newspaper El País reported, though none from Ms. Hermoso herself. It invited her to formalize a complaint within 15 days. She said in a statement on Friday that the kiss made her feel "vulnerable" and a "victim of an attack."

Another complaint, separate from the incident with Ms. Hermoso, concerned "obscene exhibitionism before a minor," in reference to Mr. Rubiales's clutching of his crotch in the presence of the princess Sofía, age 16.

The Spanish team recently found success at the highest levels of women's soccer, after reaching the Women's World Cup for the first time in 2015, but the events involving Mr. Rubiales were a reminder that the program has been plagued by sexism and other scandals.

Mr. Rubiales is a vice president of UEFA, soccer's governing body in Europe, and has been leading a joint bid by Spain, Portugal, Morocco and possibly Ukraine to host the 2030 World Cup. FIFA, soccer's global governing body, had already suspended Mr. Rubiales from the sport for 90 days. The entire female team and dozens of other players signed a joint statement saying they would not take the field to play for Spain "if the current managers continue."

Criticism of Mr. Rubiales has come from the government, too. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez described his conduct as "unacceptable," and the secretary of the opposition People's Party, Cuca Gamarra, called the kiss "shameful."

Players from around the world showed their support for Ms. Hermoso, often using the hashtag "se acabó," or "it's over," after a social media post by Alexia Putellas, a member of the Spanish national team.

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