Time to Say “Sorry”

Contributed by Danusa Ocholi
Sunday, 04 January 2009

Sani Lulu Abdullahi, President of the Nigerian Football Federation, apologises to Nigerians for the poor outing of most of the country’s soccer teams in 2008

The year 2008 is one of the worst for football in Nigeria in several years. Sani Lulu Abdullahi, president of the Nigerian Football Federation, NFF, has shed light on why the country recorded one of its worst moments in the game. Apart from the nation’s under-23 soccer team which won silver in the soccer event at the Beijing Olympics, and the Super Eagles advancing to the final phase of the qualifying rounds of the 2010 World Cup campaign, the women’s soccer teams and the men’s junior national teams recorded appalling results. The women’s senior soccer team, the Falcons, performed woefully at the Beijing Olympics, where they lost their three group matches to Korea, Japan, and the US. The Nigerian girls also surrendered their African crown to Equatorial Guinea, for the first time in 10 years in November. The junior women’s teams did not fair well in the other FIFA-organised competitions held towards the end of the year in Chile and New Zealand. The men’s under-20 team were kicked out by Senegal in the quarter-final of the West African Football Union, WAFU, Cup held in Warri in December; while the nation’s Under-17 side lost to Benin Republic, 3-2 aggregate in the CAF qualifying competition by the middle of the year. The catalogue of defeats extended to the country’s home base national team which failed to qualify for the finals of the maiden edition of the African Championship billed for Cote d’Ivoire in February. The home base Eagles were eliminated from the qualifying series of the CAF competition following their 3-2 aggregate loss to Ghana in the last phase of the qualifying campaign. Abdullahi explained last week in Lagos the coaches were to blame for the nation’s woeful outing last year. He said the coaches failed to live up to expectation in the tasks assigned to them. “The technical crew is one of our major problems. We used the white men before this time, and they could not produce results. Now that we are partnering with the Nigeria coaches, we are also not getting the result. We thought these coaches we are using are our best. From their results, it is obvious that our best is not good enough. It is something we are going to look into,” he added. The NFF president said for Nigeria to do well in the New Year, the Federation would take drastic action to enable it get the best from its coaches whose input plays crucial roles in the success of soccer teams and events. Abdullahi told Newswatch that he would ensure that the technical crew is overhauled in the new year for better performance and better results for the nation. “We cannot afford this magnitutde of failure which came in particular towards the closing stages of the year,” he said. He said the board of the NFF would brainstorm with the interim board of the Nigerian Coaches Association under the leadership of Adegboye Onigbinde on the way forward for the game.” The NFF president is optimistic that at the end, a structure for the categorisation of the coaches in the country would be worked out. Abdullahi said that the evolvement of a new structure for coaches was in line with the practice in FIFA and CAF where coaches are graded based on their qualifications, experience, performances and other variables that are put into consideration. The grading of coaches would help the NFF and other agencies that would require their services to get to know the best. “Incompetent coaches will not be allowed to handle assignments that are beyond their capability.” He said the data base that would be produced from the categorisation of the coaches would be made available to FIFA, CAF and other international bodies that may wish to engage the services of the Nigerian coaches or may require information about them for other purposes. Abdullahi said there was no way the NFF would do away with the services of the Nigerian coaches even in the face of the shortcomings they have displayed so far. “Nigerians have been calling on us to do away with their services, to dismiss them, but we will continue to use Nigerian coaches that prove themselves," he told Newswatch. The NFF president however apologised to Nigerians for the losses recorded by some of the national teams in 2008 and promised the football-loving Nigerians that the New Year would witness remarkable improvement in the country’s football. He assured that the entire system of coaching in the country was being overhauled for better results this year. Abdullahi expressed confidence that the country’s under-20 team would do better in the African Youth Championship, AYC, scheduled to commence in Rwanda this month. “If we do well in Rwanda, I believe we will go on to do equally well in the World Youth Championship, WYC, scheduled to hold in Egypt in September,” he said. The NFF president who is the chairman of the Local Organising Committee, LOC, for the Under-17 World Cup billed to hold in the country in October said efforts were being made to make the organisation of the event a huge success.