



By George Stavroulakis

A-LEAGUE

MELBOURNE VICTORY STRANDED IN NEW ZEALAND, MUST SELF ISOLATE FOR 14 DAYS

A team of Australian footballers have been left high and dry after they were promised their weekend trip to play in New Zealand was safe.



Anthony Lesiotis, Elvis Kamsoba and Storm Roux of the Victory

Melbourne Victory are angry and confused as they brace for two weeks of self-isolation after a debilitating A-League defeat in Wellington.

Star striker Ola Toivonen has hit out on social media at the scenario confronting his out-of-sorts team when they get home on Monday, insisting they had been "promised" a problem-free return to Melbourne by the Australian government before they departed.

The Swedish striker hinted on Twitter that Victory players were stunned to learn of the government's strict border measures and a midnight Sunday cut-off, announced soon before kick-off.

"Unique/bizarre situation here in NZ. Friday we were promised, by the Australian government, that there would be no ramifications returning to Australia on Monday. Looking at 14 days quarantine now," he wrote.

Players union boss John Didulica was furious. "We had assurances from DFAT that this would not happen. That was the total precondition for us committing to play the game," he said. **"It's a disgrace.** If we had been told this was a possibility then we would not have flown over there, or if we knew earlier in the day that the conditions would be changed then we would have rescheduled the flights and left Wellington earlier in the day so that we would have been able to get home in time.

"The impact of isolation is disastrous for the players. They can't train, they have to stay in their own homes, and they won't be able to play in their games for the next fortnight. The players acted in good faith and have been let down."

The A-League is likely to be suspended from Monday when soccer's hierarchy detail the immediate future of the competition amid the coronavirus crisis.

Football Federation Australia chiefs will announce their response to the pandemic at a media conference on Monday morning in Sydney.

A suspension appears likely but if the league continues with games, they will be staged with no spectators, given government edicts against non-essential gatherings of 500 people or more. **Victory won't** be able to play for a fortnight because of

"I believe it needs a break to let this settle down ... and I think everyone knows what they need to do moving forward," he said after his team's 3-0 home win on Sunday over Victory.

"I just think common sense should prevail. The first thing to the forefront should be player safety."

Phoenix general manager David Dome said his third-placed team could finish their campaign on Australian soil.

But they couldn't play for 14 days while undergoing mandatory isolation, and then would have an intense run of games, probably in empty stadiums.

"We didn't want to capitulate and not play out," Dome said on Sunday. "We had to do our best to get into the finals series. The disappointing thing for us is that the fans won't be there to enjoy it."

Coach Carlos Salvachua was perplexed by what self-isolation meant and how his team would cope with it for 14 days heading into the final weeks of a mediocre season by their standards.

A 3-0 loss to the in-form Phoenix dropped the perennial powerhouses to second last on the standings with five rounds remaining.

Victory released a statement late on Sunday, saying it would comply with the government protocols.

However, immediately after full-time, caretaker coach Salvachua was seeking guidance on what isolation would mean and how it would affect preparations for their next game, whenever it was played.

"I can't imagine. What means isolation, I don't know? Stay at home or not, I don't know," he said.

"It is too early to know what is going to happen. Anyone who knows what it means, explain to me please.

Salvachua wouldn't comment on suggestions the Wellington game should have been postponed, giving his team a chance to return home before the restrictions kicked in.



A fan wears a mask during the round 23 A-League match between Wellington Phoenix and Melbourne Victory

newly enacted isolation rules - players and club staff will spend the next two weeks in isolation when they return home on Monday from New Zealand.

And Wellington players and staff face the same scenario should they travel to Australia to play games.

The Phoenix have offered to be based in Australia, most likely Sydney, for the remainder of the season, but their coach Ufuk Talay says suspending the league appears the best option.