

## Southeast Asia's African Football Slaves

Hoping to become football stars, young West Africans are coming to Southeast Asia in droves. Some will never make it home.

By **Jeremy Luedi**  
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It was a sweltering summer day in Phnom Penh, Cambodia as a young aspiring football player stepped onto the parched, brown turf of the 70,000 capacity Olympic Stadium (which, despite its name, has never hosted the Olympic Games). Already in ill health, he nevertheless braved the 37-degree Celsius weather; little did he know that he would be dead before the final whistle.

This was the fate of Wilson Mene, a 25-year-old player for Prek Pra Keila — a Cambodian football team in the country's Metfone C-League — who died after suffering a heart attack on the field.

It would have been a tragedy under any circumstances; however, Mene's background catapulted the story into the national consciousness. Like hundreds of others, Mene had journeyed from West Africa (Nigeria, to be precise) to Cambodia in the hopes of becoming a football star.

The fact that hundreds of Africans are competing to play in the minor leagues of a small, largely overlooked nation on the other side of the world highlights the lack of opportunities for African youth back in their home countries. Dreams of football glory lead many aspiring athletes to pursue a professional sports career, one of the few avenues of social mobility in West Africa. While the ultimate goal for most is to find mainstream success in Europe, an oversaturated market to the north has many looking instead to the east.

### Strong Lure of Greener Fields

The key driving force behind this exodus of African footballers is the sorry state of professional football in West Africa. While countries like Cameroon and Senegal are competitive at the international level, most regional and local teams cannot even afford to pay their players. Three out of four African footballers earn **less than \$1,000** per month, with most having to supplement their incomes with assistance from families and donations from fans. Consequently, while salaries in Asian football leagues are but a pittance in comparison to Europe, they are generally several orders of magnitude higher than the kind of remuneration African players can expect to receive at home.

For instance, top foreign players can earn up to \$9,000 per month in Myanmar, \$80,000 per year in Vietnam, and \$200,000 to \$300,000 in Indonesia. Buoyed by tales of success from fellow nationals, thousands of West African players set out on journeys to Asia. Many base their plans for success on assumptions about the quality of Asian football leagues, viewing them as easier to enter, with Asian teams willing to sign any foreigner of even middling skill.

"African players who come here because they think they'll find it easy soon realize that the [Myanmar National League] is not what they expected. On the face of it, the Myanmar football world seems easy but when you're involved as a player **the competition is very tough**," Jonathan Yamoah, the Ghanaian manager of Nay Pyi Taw FC, said in a 2016 interview. Yamoah traveled the world as a roving professional football player, playing on three continents, before arriving in Myanmar in 2009 when the Myanmar National League was created.



In this July 19, 2015 photo, fans watch players train at the Al-Ahly Sporting Club in Cairo, Egypt.

Image Credit: AP Photo/Mohammed El Raai

## **FIFA's Reforms Fall Flat, Exposing Young Players to Greater Danger**

These false hopes are also fanned by unscrupulous middlemen and other fixers claiming to facilitate contracts with Asian football clubs. The unforgiving reality of supply and demand means that there are far more aspiring players than available positions, a fact exploited by scammers and human trafficking operations. This state of affairs is only exacerbated by the plethora of fake agents, a situation that changes to FIFA regulations have only made worse in recent years.

Prior to 2015, all football agents had to pass tests and secure accreditation with their respective national football associations. Inconsistent standards and corruption meant that only 30 percent of player transfers were conducted by vetted agents. In 2015, FIFA sought to fix the broken agent system by allowing prospective agents to self-certify in order to bypass the often-corrupt African football associations. Unsurprisingly for everyone except FIFA, this change has only led to an explosion in the number of dubious agents, as anyone can pose as a FIFA-approved facilitator based solely on their own claims of good character.

“I don't know of many industries where intermediaries can self-certify their good character, where a broker isn't properly vetted, regulated or has professional standards,” Jack Marsh, head of youth protection at the International Centre for Sport Security, *told Al Jazeera*.

The demand for foreign talent in Asia, combined with the large cohort of desperate African youth and host of nefarious “agents” has led to a perfect storm for the trafficking of footballers to Asia. The FIFA-backed NGO Culture Foot Solidaire estimates that some **15,000 teenage footballers** are moved out of West Africa each year, many of them illegally, with many ending up in Southeast Asia.

Back in February 2015, FIFPro — the global players union — managed to release almost two dozen underage players from football slavery in Laos. The youths, some as young as 14, had been invited to the country by former Liberian international player Alex Karmo to join his football academy, only to be forced to sign six year contracts for Champasak United. While their contracts promised pay and accommodation, the young players never received any money and were confined to the club's stadium, where almost 30 players slept on the floor in a shared room.

While Karmo maintained that the players were indeed paid and treated well, at least one young player described conditions at the club as “slave work.” The players were also denied medical care despite some members of the team contracting malaria and typhus. Similar poor conditions were believed to have led to the death of Wilson Mene — technically an “unpaid volunteer” — several years before in Cambodia.

“It's an ‘academy’ that has no coach nor doctor. Karmo was the coach, the business manager, everything. It was completely absurd,” *fumed* Wleh Bedell, a Liberian journalist and sports promoter, in comments to the *BBC*. At the time, FIFPro also commented on the case, stating that the organization suspects the incident is “only the tip of the iceberg” when it comes to the situation of African players in the region. The recent election of George Weah — widely considered the greatest African footballer of all time — to Liberia's highest office hopefully provides the Liberian government with the political will to tackle the trafficking of footballers going forward.

Anyone visiting countries in Southeast Asia will be surprised by the number of African men that can be found in major cities and rural hinterlands alike, their dreams of football fame shattered. Many arrive after scraping together thousands of dollars for signing fees and travel expenses only to see their supposed agents disappear with their money upon arrival. For example, Emmanuel Koska gave up a position with a second division team in Cameroon and sold his father's land to pay for trip to Thailand, where he was promised a guaranteed position with a Thai club. Not only did his agent desert him, but the club that had ostensibly hired him did not retain him.

Koska joins a raft of other African players marooned in various Asian nations, with most unable to save enough money — if they are lucky enough to land a menial job — for a return journey. Speaking on the situation in Cambodia, one Cameroonian agent noted that “out of 40 players officially under contract and playing for a team, there are **50 others** in the street without contract or means of living [sic].” In April 2017, four Nigerians in Cambodia were arrested on charges of human trafficking and another eight were deported. This came less than a month after another raid by Cambodian police rounded up 23 Nigerians who were in the country illegally after being scammed by traffickers promising well-paid jobs.

## **Play (for Peanuts) or Prison: The Stark Choice Facing African Footballers**

The glut of unemployed African footballers in Asia has allowed even small local teams to acquire foreign players. While this oversupply does open up some well-paid positions — almost every Thai Premier League team has at least one African player, with some sporting half a dozen — many more Africans across Southeast Asia play for C and D league teams with shoestring budgets.

Desperate, with no funds and expired visas, many African footballers will accept any position — even unpaid ones — in order to survive, putting all the negotiating power in the hands of local clubs. Many African footballers enter Southeast Asian countries on tourist visas, betting everything on landing a job. These visas quickly expire, leaving young Africans with two options: work for the lowest bidder or face prison or deportation.

With the threat of deportation or imprisonment hanging over their heads these players have no recourse when faced with abuse, exploitation, and wages that barely reach subsistence levels. “Many clubs take advantage [of the fact] that they can get these African players for **close to nothing**,” notes Gabriel Ken Gadaffi, former president of Cambodia’s Nigerian Community Association. By way of example, wages for exploited African players can be as low as \$200 per month in countries like Myanmar, where a pair of football shoes alone can cost \$100.

Having staked their life’s savings on forays to Asia, most African players linger, clinging to the hope that their big break is right around the corner. Others are too ashamed to return home empty-handed, instead opting to try their luck in other jobs or crime. For instance, two aspiring Cameroonian footballers were arrested back in 2010 for claiming to be able to counterfeit U.S. dollars after they failed to land a contract. Even world-class athletes have found themselves in prison after their visas have expired, including Louis-Paul Mfede, one of Asia’s earliest (and most prestigious) African football expats. Mfede, a two-time World Cup player for Cameroon, spent time in an Indonesian jail for overstaying his visa.

Economic growth in Southeast Asia is seeing more money enter football, especially as more local companies and citizens accumulate the kind of disposable income needed to sponsor and patronize local clubs. The caliber of Asian football has lagged behind the rest of the world, especially when compared to other developing regions such as Latin America and Africa, leading to a sustained drive among Asian clubs to import foreign talent.

Increased investment by big league clubs and simultaneous belt-tightening by teams in overcrowded lower tiers has created a dual-faceted demand for African players across Southeast Asia. Lured by dreams of financial stability and personal fame, young African players arrive in Asia hoping to secure a spot with the former, but all too often ending up toiling for the latter at subsistence level wages. Even these players are more fortunate than the many others like Wilson Mene, who are being exploited by “volunteer” positions or outright indentureship.

For many young Africans in Southeast Asia, the beautiful game has become a baneful shame.

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