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# Coronavirus death: Senegal, French football mourn iconic Pape Diouf | Africanews

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Pape Diouf, a former president of French soccer club Marseille, died Tuesday in Senegal after contracting the coronavirus. It was the West African country's first COVID-19-related death, according to the health ministry. He was 68.

Diouf, who was president of Marseille from 2005-09, had been treated since Saturday in intensive care in Dakar, health minister Abdoulaye Diouf Sarr said. Senegal President Macky Sall wrote on his official Twitter account that he had followed Diouf's health closely after he was admitted for treatment.

"I pay tribute to this great figure in sport," Sall wrote. "I pay tribute to the medical staff at Fann Hospital who spared no effort to save him." Relatives said Diouf was meant to be moved to France. He had recently traveled to several countries in the West Africa region.

In its most recent count, Senegal has reported 190 cases of the coronavirus, with 45 of those having recovered. Diouf was a charismatic and popular leader who was close to the fans and

players at Marseille, the only French team to win the European club title.

“Pape will forever remain in the hearts of Marseille people and (is) one of the great architects of the club,” Marseille wrote under a photo of Diouf.

Shortly before his time at the club ended, Diouf signed Didier Deschamps as the new coach and Deschamps won the French league title and League Cup in his first season in charge. It was Marseille’s first league title in 18 years.

Deschamps, who coached France to World Cup success two years ago, described Diouf as “a man of convictions, a spirited man, passionate about football” adding that his “sudden and brutal death deeply saddens me.”

“I could measure his popularity, which was immense with the Marseille people whose hearts he had won,” Deschamps said on L’Equipe’s website. The French soccer league called Diouf’s death “a moment of immense sadness for French soccer.”

Diouf was born in Chad to Senegalese parents. After arriving in Marseille at the age of 18, he became a sports journalist and then a players’ agent. Diouf was not afraid to take risks in signing unheralded players, such as the diminutive Mathieu Valbuena from third-tier side Libourne in 2006 when he was 21.

The 1.67-meter (5 feet, 5 inches) Valbuena went on to prove Diouf right, and all the doubters wrong, playing 52 times for France.

“A great man with a great heart,” Valbuena said. “We were hypnotized by his speeches, he had a lot of charisma.” Diouf was awarded the French Legion of Honor medal in 2012, one of the

country's highest honors.

***AP***