

Cuban players defect before match at Reliant

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Two players defected from the Cuban national soccer team before Wednesday's Gold Cup match against Honduras at Reliant Stadium, sources said.

Forward Lester More and midfielder Osvaldo Alonso defected, apparently while the team was in Houston, according to two people with knowledge of the situation, both of whom asked not to be identified.

During the press conference after the game, won by Honduras 5-0, Cuban coach Raul Gonzalez was asked several times about the reported defections.

"I am a man of soccer; I don't discuss politics, so I'm not going to answer that question."

Pressed further, Gonzalez said, "The ones that are not here are not here because they choose not to be."

Asked if he were missing a key player (More), he replied, "I was missing two key players tonight. One because of cards (a disqualification) and one because ... he's simply no longer on the team."

Asked again if any players had defected, Gonzalez walked out of the auditorium, mumbling, "That's not my problem."

Questioned briefly after the press conference, Gonzalez was more poignant: "It's morally wrong to leave your country."

For Wednesday's match, the team suited up only 17 players on its original 20-man roster. Besides More and Alonso, forward Pedro Minoso was scratched because he got yellow cards in each of the previous two games.

The tournament crowns the champion of the North and Central American and Caribbean region. Cuba's original Gold Cup roster listed 20 players.

In a statement, the sponsoring Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football distanced itself from the situation, saying "this is not a matter that involves CONCACAF."

U.S. law usually protects Cuban nationals who request political asylum while on U.S. soil.

Such defections are not a new occurrence. Cuban athletes - most notably baseball players, including pitchers Jose Ariel Contreras and brothers Livan and Orlando Hernandez - have defected from the communist country while in international competitions outside Cuba.

During a 2005 Gold Cup tournament, Cuban forward Maykel Galindo defected in Seattle. After a stint in the lower-tier United Soccer Leagues, Galindo signed with Major League Soccer club Chivas USA this season.

In Washington, D.C., the U.S. State Department had no information about any defection from the Cuban team, said a spokesman who referred questions to the Department of Homeland Security. A spokesman there said Wednesday night the agency could not confirm or deny that one or more players defected.

No one answered the phone at night at the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, an office that handles travel requests to Cuba and other matters for the island country. Cuba has no formal diplomatic relations with the United States and therefore has no embassy here.

Chronicle reporter Joseph Duarte contributed to this report.