

APR FC's CAF Champions League campaign got off to a losing start on Sunday, as a 44th-minute goal from Zemanga Soze gave Les Aigles du Congo a 1-0 first-leg advantage in a preliminary-round tie played behind closed doors amid an Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The match, held at Stade Frédéric Kibassa Maliba, was closed to spectators as a precaution linked to the ongoing Ebola outbreak in eastern DRC, which has killed more than 2,000 people and infected over 4,000 in the region. Players were also barred from exchanging jerseys after the final whistle under arrangements put in place for the fixture.

The tie had already been mired in controversy before kick-off. APR FC had asked CAF to move the match to a neutral venue, citing both the Ebola outbreak and ongoing security and political tensions between Rwanda and the DRC. CAF rejected the request, and after initially being ordered to play in Kinshasa, the fixture was ultimately switched to Lubumbashi.

With their request denied, APR FC took no chances. The Rwandan champions flew into Lubumbashi on a chartered flight hours before kick-off and left immediately after the match, forgoing an overnight stay in the country entirely. The team travelled straight from the airport to the stadium and back, departing for Kigali as soon as the final whistle blew.

On the pitch, APR FC held their defensive shape for large stretches of the first half in the empty, subdued stadium, but a lapse in concentration allowed Soze to break through and score the game's only goal shortly before the break. The Rwandan side were unable to find an equaliser in the second half.

The win also marks a first for Les Aigles du Congo in this season's competition — and a notable improvement on last year's campaign. The Linafoot runners-up made their previous Champions League appearance a difficult one, exiting in the first round to Nigeria's Rivers United after a goalless draw at home in Kinshasa followed by a 1-0 defeat away.

APR FC now trail 1-0 on aggregate heading into the second leg, which will be played at Amahoro Stadium in Kigali on 11 September. Les Aigles du Congo will need to defend their lead on the road to reach the next round, while the Rwandan champions look to overturn the deficit on home soil.

