Mali head coach Tony Silver has questioned whether the poor condition of the playing surface at Amahoro Stadium was a deliberate strategy by the hosts, saying his team is used to playing possession football.

Silver made the remarks at a press conference ahead of Mali's match against Rwanda, where both coaches criticised the state of the pitch.

"I don't know whether it was strategic or not. If having a poor pitch was a deliberate strategy, it was very clever, because we know Mali is a team that likes to have possession of the ball," he said.

Rwanda national football team, Amavubi, head coach Stephen Constantine was equally critical, describing the pitch as a disgrace and questioning how it was being managed.

"It's a disgrace. I mean, if I were to manage the pitch, it wouldn't be this bad, okay? And you go and see the training pitch outside. You can't play football on these pitches, not anymore," Constantine said.

The criticism has drawn attention to the condition of the playing surface at a stadium that underwent a major renovation and was approved by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to host international competitions in June 2024.

The pitch is a hybrid surface, combining natural grass with synthetic fibres. It measures 105 by 68 metres, and the playing surface was raised by approximately two metres during the renovation.

The condition of the pitch has also attracted attention on social media, where some users have compared it to a potato plantation.

Heavy rainfall could be contributing to the problem, but this has not been established. Poor drainage, waterlogging, compacted soil or inadequate maintenance can all affect a football surface during wet weather. The question is whether the pitch's drainage and maintenance systems are adequate for the conditions in which it is expected to be used.

The renovation of Amahoro Stadium was reported to have cost between US$160 million and US$165 million, although some reports put the figure at about US$170 million. These figures relate to the overall stadium project, not the playing surface alone. The specific amount spent on installing the hybrid pitch has not been publicly

established.

CAF and FIFA approved the renovated stadium to host international football competitions on June 13, 2024, following inspections by CAF officials. The approval came three days before the first match at the renovated stadium, between APR FC and Rayon Sports.

However, approval to host international matches does not guarantee that the playing surface will remain in good condition under all weather conditions. The recent complaints raise questions about the pitch's drainage, maintenance and overall management.

The Football Association of Rwanda (FERWAFA) had not commented on the condition of the pitch at the time of publication.

The criticism came as Rwanda's hopes of reaching the Africa Cup of Nations suffered another setback, with Mali winning the return leg of their Group K double-header 2-0 at Amahoro Stadium on Tuesday.

Modibo Sagnan headed Mali in front from a free-kick in the 27th minute before Gaoussou Diarra sealed the victory in the 88th minute.

Mali had won the first meeting 3-2 in Bamako on Friday, with substitute Mamadou Camara scoring the winner in the 84th minute.

Speaking after the match, Silver said his team had expected a difficult encounter and made tactical adjustments to deal with Rwanda's attacking movement. He acknowledged that the hosts had caused problems after the break, forcing Mali to retreat and defend for an extended period.

"In football, no team anywhere in the world can control all 90 minutes. Our team had to adapt to Rwanda's improved approach," he said.

Constantine said Rwanda's response to the defeat should not depend solely on changes to the senior team, arguing that improvements must begin with the structures responsible for developing young players.

"We need to develop our young players because we have the talent in this country. Stronger grassroots programmes, better coaching and more opportunities for young footballers to progress are extremely important," he said.

He also questioned the limited availability of academies at club level, saying Rwanda needed to invest in developing players from an early age rather than expecting the national team to bridge the gap on its own.

Despite his disappointment with the result, Constantine said he was encouraged by his team’s response after the break, when Rwanda managed to put Mali under sustained pressure.

Elsewhere in Group K, Liberia beat Cape Verde 2-0.

Mali now have 12 points from four matches, while Rwanda remain second with six. Liberia and Cape Verde have three points each.

Two matches remain in the group, scheduled for March 2027. Mali have secured one of the two qualifying places, while Rwanda remain in contention for the other.