

It is not every day that a country's football league suddenly hosts foreign clubs. Last month, when AL Hilal and Al Merrikh touched down at Kigali International Airport to compete in the Rwanda Premier League, fans cheered, the headlines buzzed, and the local football scene came alive with curiosity and vanity.

Yet behind the scenes, officials at local football body FERWABA, were and are still wrestling with the reality: rules, regulations and the delicate dance between law and pragmatism that often defines football administration.

Did FERWABA really need the green light from the Confederation of African's football (CAF's) formal permission, or was it enough to simply notify Dr. Patrice Mostepe that the Sudanese teams had arrived in Kigali.

Until now, FERWABA is still waiting for a confirmation from CAF that the Sudanese teams can compete. It's an unusual situation, one that exposes the grey areas in football governance and highlights how rules often lag behind reality.

When the rulebook doesn't cover it, you realize football's legal frameworks were written for another era. No one expected that political instability or conflict could displace entire clubs, forcing them to play thousands of kilometers away from home. CAF's statutes don't explicitly provide for a team from one member country joining the league of another. And that leaves federations like FERWABA walking a tightrope: how do you balance legality with pragmatism?

FERWABA has made its position clear. If a Sudanese club finishes top of the league, it will take the championship trophy, but the right to represent Rwanda in the CAF Champions League will go to the highest-placed local team. That's an important distinction: these Sudanese clubs are temporary guests, not permanent members of Rwandan football.

There's precedent for this kind of arrangement. Take Israel, for instance. Despite being geographically in Asia, Israeli clubs have played in European competitions since 1992. It wasn't a casual decision, UEFA members had to vote Israel in, recognizing the unique political and security challenges that left its clubs with few alternatives.

Then there's Monaco in France. The tiny principality has no domestic league capable of supporting professional football, so AS Monaco has competed in France's league system since the 1920s. It's now a top-flight club with multiple Ligue 1 titles

to its name. The key point: Monaco wasn't a permanent member of France; it was a pragmatic solution, agreed between federations that worked for everyone.

Even clubs like Cardiff and Swansea in Wales play in the English league system, arrangements formally approved by the relevant authorities. These examples show that cross-border football can work, as long as it's managed carefully and the rules are respected.

Al Hilal and Al Merrikh's short stay in Mauritania gives a practical lesson. They left Sudan due to conflict, and while Mauritania accommodated them, travel logistics, visas, and the need for proper training facilities eventually made it difficult to continue there. This illustrates that hosting displaced teams requires more than goodwill; it needs planning, infrastructure, and legal clarity.

Rwanda is now stepping in, offering a safe and competitive space for these clubs. In fact, on Monday, Al Hilal played a friendly against AS Kigali, winning 2-0. The match gave local fans an early glimpse of what to expect when the Sudanese visitors officially join the league. It's a delicate balancing act: preserving the spirit of football, respecting CAF's oversight, and ensuring that local teams still retain their competitive opportunities.

At the heart of it are two men: Mutasim Gafar Sirelkhatim of Sudan and Shema Fabrice of Rwanda. Their cooperation could set an important example for African football. It shows that when clubs are displaced by conflict, solidarity, pragmatism, and flexibility can keep the game alive, and that sometimes, the rules need to bend slightly to protect what matters most: the sport itself.

In my view, the excitement surrounding the arrival of the Sudanese clubs goes far beyond the scores and standings. Football fans, and even the media, have embraced their presence not merely for the competition, but for the spectacle, the energy, and the refreshing style of play they bring to local grounds. It's a reminder that football's magic often lies in diversity and the unexpected.

For those passionate about "real football," beyond the usual domestic fixtures, this is an opportunity to experience something fresh, to see new approaches on the pitch, and to measure local talent against visiting teams.

Local players and clubs stand to gain too. Facing seasoned Sudanese squads offers them a rare chance to test their skills, learn from different styles of play, and

sharpen their craft in ways that domestic matches alone can't provide. For fans and players alike, it's a moment to engage, grow, and be part of a football story that goes beyond the ordinary league season.