

FA's moral crusade is wrecked by sex scandal at Soho Square

By Ashling O'Connor

FOR two of the most powerful men in English football, the attractive secretary at the game's London headquarters proved to be an engaging companion.

Sven-Göran Eriksson, the England coach, and Mark Palios, his boss as chief executive of the Football Association, found themselves competing for the attentions of Faria Alam. But the actions of the men, who run English football, have raised serious concerns about the governance at the FA's Soho Square headquarters in Central London.

Employment lawyers said last night that the men's behaviour may have exposed them and the FA to explosive sex discrimination cases. After a week of denials from the FA after the publication of the allegations in a Sunday newspaper, the governing body was forced into a humiliating admission that Mr Eriksson had indeed had sex with Ms Alam.

Worse, the FA had to concede that Mr Palios also had sexual relations with the secretary within the same six-month period.

Ms Alam, 38, a former model, is on annual leave this week from the FA, where she is personal assistant to David Davies, an executive director of the sport's governing body. She is believed to be taking legal advice about her situation.

It is understood that no disciplinary action is to be taken against either Mr Eriksson, 56, or Mr Palios, 51, who are both single.

However, there is still the question of how the FA came to issue a denial last week that a relationship between Ms Alam and Mr Eriksson existed.

Senior members of the FA's 12-man executive board are demanding to be told why the organisation was forced, on Sunday, to issue a humiliating U-turn confirming the affair. How much damage is caused by the latest scandal to rock the FA depends on the handling of Ms Alam when she returns to work on Monday remains to be seen. If she is forced out of her £35,000-a-year job, questions would be asked about why Mr Eriksson and Mr Palios are still in their posts.

"Extreme caution is required," Nicholas Lakeland, an employment lawyer and partner at Silverman Sherliker, said. "These things can end up in court very easily, particularly when relationships come to an end, because potentially you are talking about a Sex Discrimination Act claim if the treatment of the female employee is different from that of the male employee."

No decision has been taken about Ms Alam's future but FA insiders suggested that a compromise deal could possibly be sought involving a pay-off and a waiving of her right to pursue a legal claim. Even if she stays,

hotted of office romance. But the high profile of football might have been thought to have urged greater discretion.

Unlike Thomsons, the tour operator whose staff have to inform direct superiors if they become romantically involved with another employee, or Wal-Mart, owner of Asda, where "relations" between a manager and a subordinate result in dismissal, the FA has no rule about romantic involvements at work.

This is despite the fact that Eversheds, the law firm that drafted Mr Eriksson's contract when he moved to England from Lazio, and the FA's employment adviser, was the firm to adapt the US model of the Consensual Relationship Agreement — as featured in an episode of *Ally McBeal* — to the British market. The so-called "love contract" was adopted by some British companies.

For Mr Palios, a divorced father of two, the tabloid headlines make excruciatingly uncomfortable reading. Mr Palios started his job in July of last year and immediately signalled a crackdown on player behaviour on the pitch. He was also behind the tough stance against Manchester United's Rio Ferdinand following his failure to take a drug test.

Ben Wells, a director at Red-mandarin, a sports sponsorship agency, said: "It has really undermined his position. He cannot now be talking about the behaviour of players when this has gone right to the top."

**SVEN:
CAN HE MAKE
THE GREAT
ESCAPE?**

Sport, pages 70-72



ON A DATE

- **July 18:** Sunday newspaper alleges Sven having affair with FA employee
- **July 19:** FA say "rumours are 100 per cent incorrect"
- **July 19:** Nancy Dell'Olio is said to have asked Sven to leave their house in London
- **July 24:** Faria Alam admits having an affair with Sven
- **July 24:** FA find out chief executive Mark Palios also had a relationship with her
- **July 27:** She goes on leave

life may be made difficult in a working environment that still has to shed its "jobs for the boys" image.

Although Ms Alam did not report directly to Mr Palios or Mr Eriksson, the affair raises questions about the professionalism of the FA after a string of compromising stories involving the erudite Swede's love life and his overt flirtation with the head coach's job at Chelsea.

With between two thirds and three quarters of British employees admitting to a fling with a colleague, according to recent research, there should be no surprise that the FA is a

THE TIMES TUESDAY JULY 27 2004



Faria Alam, above, a former model, is said to have had affairs with Sven-Göran Eriksson, the England football coach, below left, and his boss, Mark Palios, the FA's chief executive

