

Ex Barca, Inter Star Eto'o Welcomed in Dagestan

By [Kevin O'Flynn](#)

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A Cameroonian student welcomes his countryman Eto'o to Dagestan.

MAKHACHKALA, Dagestan — Fans in Makhachkala gave a frenzied welcome to Samuel Eto'o, the former Barca and Inter forward whose move to a club that few outside Russia had heard of a few months ago has stunned world football.

Eto'o, who was signed from Inter for 21 million euros (\$29 million), was presented to the fans, about 8,000 of whom packed themselves into the small stadium in Makhachkala, waving yellow flags and bursting past security guards at will to run onto the pitch and greet their hero.

The three-time Champions League winner had walked onto the pitch at the start of the ceremony to a rapturous welcome before signing footballs and booting them into the crowd. Teasing the fans with where he would send the ball, the Cameroonian striker who is reportedly on a salary of 10 million euros a year, saw one fan run toward him from the crowd,

a forerunner of chaotic scenes later.

That fan was escorted away by security, only for another to race to Eto'o and dive to the ground to worship at his feet.

That fan was a 23-year-old Cameroonian student who would only give his name as BG. He said the only thing he managed to say to his fellow countryman was: "Je t'aime, Samuel," or "I love you, Samuel."

"He is the greatest," said a dazed BG afterward, one of a small contingent of Cameroonian students in Makhachkala. He and his fellow countrymen have been ecstatic since they found out that their idol would play in their home town.

"It means everything for us that he has come here," said Fred Douala, 24, who is studying medicine. Douala was already a regular fan of Anzhi when the transfer of the most famous Cameroonian in the world was announced last month.

The fans' love for their new hero and Anzhi, a team that has been transformed since oligarch Suleiman Kerimov took over in January and started pumping millions into the team, is genuine. But others wonder about the success of a side based in a city that has seen almost daily attacks this year against police and government officials by an Islamist insurgency.

"We do not receive a lot of questions about safety," said club director German Chistyakov. "Sometimes there are problems in Moscow, Norway. We have bodyguards, security. It is not the main problem with the players."

Nevertheless, footballers like Eto'o and Anzhi's other big signing, Brazilian legend Roberto Carlos, are notably based in Moscow, flying down to Dagestan only for home games.

And Russian reality could not help intrude on the celebratory night. Eto'o announced a moment of silence at a news conference after the ceremony for those who had died in the Yak-42 that crashed in Yaroslavl, killing 43 people and decimating the Lokomotiv hockey team.

Coincidentally, Anzhi had hired a Yak-42 to transport foreign and Russian journalists from Moscow but the plane was prevented from flying out because of a safety violation, the Federal Transportation Inspection Service said in a statement on its web site. The plane did eventually fly out after three hour wait, although passengers were never informed of the reason for the delay. When one concerned journalist asked the stewardess about the delay, he was offered a whiskey.

When asked about worries over flying in Russia, Eto'o said at a news conference: "I always put my faith in God. It does not matter what kind of plane it is, Russian, Cameroonian, Spanish or Italian."

Anzhi flies on a Tu-154.

Fan worship continued throughout the ceremony on Saturday as the team took part in a training session and one child slipped out of the stands racing toward Eto'o. He was followed within seconds by at least 20 more children who popped out and raced across the pitch.

“Eto’o is the best,” said Tarlan Bakhishev, 14, who told how he had waited six hours in line for a home ticket for a previous Anzhi game and that he and his two friends had got over the barricades and run onto the pitch.

Locals said they hoped that the Anzhi project would give a better gloss to the troubled region.

“People here are grateful,” said defender Nikita Perevozchikov, 19, one of a handful of local players in the side. “There’s a huge rush of emotion. ... Maybe the football will distract from the military actions.”

“People will not think about terrorism when they think about Dagestan but about football,” Rustam Gadzhiyeva, 30, said outside the stadium. “Tourists will come.”

That is probably a long way off for a region that is listed as a no-go area by many embassies, but fans could not hide their enthusiasm at seeing stars that they had never expected, joking about further acquisitions.

“I like Eto’o and Christian Ronaldo,” said Ali Mustafayev, 13, a friend of Bakhishev, when asked who his favorite players were. When somebody said Real Madrid star Ronaldo did not play for Anzhi, he giggled and said: “He will come soon.”

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