

Leone Stars battle hunger



CLAUDIO PAPI/REUTERS

SIERRA LEONE STAR MOHAMED KALLON (LEFT IN ITALIAN LEAGUE ACTION FOR REGGINA AGAINST JUVENTUS DEFENDER PAOLO MONTERO) RETURNED FOR THE WORLD CUP EFFORT.

War-ravaged Sierra Leone returned to big-time soccer with a 2-0 loss to African heavyweight Nigeria, but its new manager hoped a new strategy will lead to success down the road — making sure the players get enough to eat.

"When I took over, I found the players were coming to train but had nothing to eat," says Paul Kamara, the human rights activist and publisher who was recently appointed team manager. "Now, we make sure they do not go home hungry."

"Football can be part of a renaissance in this country. It is a way of showing that we have the brains and the talent here and that we don't have to submit to corrupt leaders or the likes of the rebels."

Nigeria was tougher than the British marines who lost, 13-1, on a slippery field a week earlier in a friendly between the national team and the soldiers sent to save Freetown from rebel attack.

Like many African national teams, Sierra Leone is dependent on its expatriates since no local team could afford to pay a

player enough to keep him in the local league.

For the younger players, still in Freetown, playing for the national team offers a chance to be spotted by a talent scout and whisked away from poverty and the violence of war.

The Leone Stars rarely have a chance to train as a team.

A handful of foreign stars, including attacker Mohammed Kallon who plays with Italian Serie A team Reggina, turned up in time for the game against the marines — the first since Sierra Leone eliminated tiny Sao Tome e Principe, 4-0, in the first round.

"The biggest problem we have is having one set of players one day and then another the next," said Yugoslav coach Dusan Draskovic, the former Ecuadoran national team coach. "As well as the foreign-based players, the young ones have everything you need, the right psychology, technical, tactical and physical ability. I am sure they will be able to succeed. We can do very well."