

Tens of thousands throng Brazil stadium to bid emotional farewell to plane crash victims

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Brasilia: People thronged the stadium in the southern Brazilian city of Chapeco to bid an emotional farewell to players and other members of the Chapecoense soccer team who died in a plane crash earlier this week in Colombia.

Despite the overall mood of sadness that marked the rain-drenched mass wake, the crowd on Saturday chanted in unison "the champion has returned" when the host promised that the club devastated by Monday night's accident would rebuild itself with the "joy, faith and hope that these players represented", EFE news reported.

Like they did on Wednesday, the scheduled date for the first leg of the now-cancelled Copa Sudamericana final pitting Chapecoense against Medellin, Colombia-based Atletico Nacional, players from the modest 43-year-old club's lower-level squads took the field at Arena Conda to show it still has hope and a future.

A huge banner inside the stadium reading "A Hero Doesn't Die. He Becomes a Legend" summed up the crowd's affection for its beloved club, which had climbed steadily up the ranks of Brazilian soccer in recent years from the fourth division to the league's top flight.

Coffins with the remains of 50 of the 71 victims arrived early on Saturday at the airport in Chapeco where they were received with military honours in a brief ceremony headed by Brazilian President Michel Temer before being taken to the stadium.

Temer had only planned to take part in that ceremony but eventually went to the stadium for the mass tribute after receiving criticism from some of the victims' relatives.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino, former soccer great Carles Puyol and current Real Madrid midfielder Lucas Silva of Brazil were on hand for the tribute.

Chapecoense players, executives, coaches and other staff, along with special guests, journalists and a crew of nine, were on board the charter flight operated by Bolivia's Lamia airlines.

The plane departed Santa Cruz in Bolivia and crashed in the mountains before it could reach Medellin's airport.

Six people, including three players, survived the crash.

The pilot had been given priority to land after frantically alerting the control tower that the plane was running dangerously low on fuel, but he did not have enough time to get to the runway.

The Brazilian victims of the plane crash included 19 Chapecoense players, 25 executives, coaches and special guests of the club, as well as a score of journalists.

- (With IANS inputs)