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Football Killing Fields

Outrage and disbelief as world soccer body condemns Israel, not Hamas.

By Tom Gross

Israel is used to being singled out for unjust criticism and subjected to startling double standards by the United Nations, the European Union, much of the Western media and numerous academic bodies. But now FIFA — the supposedly nonpolitical organization that governs the world's most popular sport, soccer — is getting in on the act as well.

FIFA has condemned Israel for an air strike on an empty soccer field in the Gaza Strip that was used for training exercises by Islamic Jihad and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. This strike did not cause any injuries. But at the same time FIFA has refused to condemn a Palestinian rocket attack on an Israeli soccer field last week which did cause injuries.

With the soccer World Cup, which takes place only once every four years, just weeks away, it is a time of mounting emotion for the hundreds of millions of people across the globe who passionately follow the game.

As FIFA meets in the next few days to decide what action to take against Israel, the double standards involved could not be more obvious. Up to now FIFA, which sees itself as a purely sporting body, has gone out of its way to avoid politics, and has refrained from criticizing even the most appalling human-rights abuses connected to soccer players and stadiums.

NOT A WORD ABOUT SADDAM AND THE TALIBAN

When Saddam Hussein's son Uday had Iraqi soccer players tortured in 1997 after they failed to qualify for the 1998 FIFA World Cup Finals in France, FIFA remained silent. Uday, who was chairman of the Iraqi soccer association, had star players tortured again in 1998. And in 2000, following a quarterfinal defeat in the Asia Cup, three Iraqi players were whipped and beaten for three days by Uday's bodyguards. The torture took place at the Iraqi Olympic Committee headquarters, but FIFA said nothing.

Again, FIFA simply looked the other way while the Taliban used U.N.-funded soccer fields to slaughter and flog hundreds of innocent people who had supposedly violated sharia law in front of crowds of thousands chanting "God is great." (Afghan soccer coach Habib Ullahniazi said that as many as 30 people were executed in the middle of the field during the intermissions of a single soccer match at Kabul's Ghazi Stadium.)

FIFA equally failed to speak out when soccer stadiums in Argentina were turned into jails.

AND CHILE AND CHECHNYA

FIFA's silence was no less deafening when, according to the International Red Cross, about 7,000 prisoners were detained (and some tortured) in Chile's national soccer stadium after Augusto Pinochet seized power in 1973.

Nor did the organization threaten Russia with sanctions after Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov was murdered by a bomb explosion at Grozny's Dynamo stadium.

As for the Middle East, FIFA refused to criticize the decision to name a Palestinian soccer tournament after a suicide terrorist who murdered 31 people at a Passover celebration at the Park Hotel in Netanya in 2002. (At the tournament, organized under Yasser Arafat's

auspices in 2003, the brother of the suicide bomber was given the honorary role of distributing the trophies to the winning team.)

FIFA also failed to condemn the suicide bomb at the Maxim restaurant in Haifa in October 2003 which injured three officials from the leading Israeli soccer team Maccabi Haifa.

ISRAEL IS DIFFERENT...

But then last week, FIFA finally found a target worthy of its outrage, and leapt into action. That target was Israel.

The international governing body for soccer condemned the Jewish state, and announced that it was considering possible action over the Israeli air strike last week on the Gaza soccer field that had been used for terrorist training exercises. The field, which had also reportedly served as a missile launching pad, was empty at the time; the strike itself came in response to the continuing barrage of Qassam rocket attacks directed at Israeli towns and villages.

Only a couple of days earlier, one of those Qassam rockets landed on a soccer field at the Karmiya kibbutz in southern Israel, causing light injuries to one person. Several other Israeli children and adults needed to be treated for shock. The attack was claimed by the Al-Quds brigades, an armed wing of Islamic Jihad. The soccer pitch is regularly used by children and it was only a matter of luck that there were not greater injuries. (Since Israel's withdrawal from Gaza last year, several members of the kibbutz, including a ten-month-old baby, have been wounded after their homes took direct hits from Qassams. Israelis elsewhere have died after being hit by these weapons.)

... BUT NOT QASSAM ROCKETS

In an interview with the Jerusalem Post, Jerome Champagne, FIFA's deputy general secretary, who had personally condemned the attack on the Palestinian soccer pitch, refused to extend a similar condemnation to the attack on the Israeli pitch.

Champagne said he had discussed the matter with FIFA president Sepp Blatter and that a decision on what action to take against Israel would be announced soon. Champagne, a French national, also sent an official letter to the Israeli ambassador to Switzerland. (FIFA is based in Zurich.)

A FIFA condemnation of Israel is no small matter. The incredible passions that soccer arouses in most countries around the globe seem to have few boundaries. For example, it was said that the only time the guns fell silent during the Lebanese civil war was during the 1982 World Cup matches.

Individual Israelis, outraged by FIFA's blatantly one-sided decision, have been sending e-mails to FIFA asking why "they care more about the grass on an empty soccer pitch than the human lives saved by strikes on the Qassam launching pads."

ANTI-SEMITIC BANNERS AND CHANTS

They have also asked where FIFA is when anti-Semitic banners go up in European soccer stadiums, and there are chants from spectators about sending Jews to the gas? And where, they wonder, are the FIFA sanctions against the Arab or Asian countries that refuse to allow Israel to compete in Asia?

Other questions have been raised, too — why, for instance, FIFA has moved games from Israel because guest teams were afraid to come to Israel, but has never banned any

other national teams from playing home games on account of local Islamic violence. Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey were allowed to continue playing matches at home.

In response to some of this criticism Champagne — perhaps unaware of the phenomena of some radical Jews being at the forefront of whipping up hate against the Jewish state — wrote to the Jerusalem Post saying he couldn't possibly be biased against Israel because his wife was Jewish.

AP FAILS TO MENTION QASSAM ATTACK

In its widely circulated report on the FIFA condemnation of Israel, the Associated Press also failed to mention the Qassam rocket attack on the Israeli soccer pitch. As a result, and not for the first time, AP gave its readers around the globe an unbalanced impression of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The popularity of soccer ensured AP's story was used by dozens of news outlets — among others, Al-Jazeera, CBC News of Canada, and the Los Angeles Times. Only the Israeli press mentioned the Qassam attack on the kibbutz Karmiya soccer pitch, an attack which the Islamic Jihad website admits to carrying out.

"WE ARE NOT IN POLITICS"

The outrage felt in soccer-mad Israel at these astonishing double standards is all the greater since FIFA president Sepp Blatter has made it clear that FIFA should not become involved in politics. Following calls last December from German politicians that Iran should be banned from participating in the forthcoming World Cup (which starts in Germany on June 9, 2006) because of repeated Holocaust denial by the Iranian president, Blatter said "We're not going to enter into any political declarations. We in football, if we entered into such discussions, then it would be against our statutes. We are not in politics."

Indeed so emboldened does Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad now feel by FIFA's support that he announced last week that he will likely attend Iran's opening match against Mexico in Nuremberg on June 11. Holocaust denial is a serious crime punishable by a prison term of up to five years in Germany, but Ahmadinejad no doubt feels that powerful international bodies like FIFA will protect him.

A BLIND EYE TO DUBAI

Meanwhile FIFA (and other sporting bodies) continually turn a blind eye to boycotts of Israeli sportsmen.

In February, Tal Ben Haim — the Israeli national soccer team captain, who plays his club soccer for the English Premiership team Bolton Wanderers — was banned from joining his Bolton teammates for their training matches in Dubai. FIFA pointedly ignored this. So did Bolton despite the fact that the team claims to be among the leaders of the campaign to "Kick racism out of football" in the U.K.

Only last week, another English club, West Ham, left their two Israeli players, Yossi Benayoun and Yaniv Katan, at home when they went to Dubai. FIFA naturally had nothing to say.

Whilst Israel is often slandered as an "apartheid state," (despite having several Arabs playing in its national team), Dubai has received no criticism for what appears to be a clear "apartheid" policy.

Indeed, were Israel allowed to compete against other Asian teams for a World Cup berth, rather than against the likes of England and France, the relatively strong Israeli team would most probably have been able to qualify for this year's World Cup.

RONALDINHO AIDS TERROR VICTIMS

Not all is rotten in world soccer. Some individuals still seem to know right from wrong. Last week, Ronaldinho, the Brazilian superstar widely regarded as the best current player in the world, donated signed footballs and shirts to Israeli child suicide bomb survivors, saying he hoped his gifts would "warm the hearts of the children who have suffered so much."

But FIFA, meanwhile, apparently thinks it is acceptable for Palestinian terror groups to continue targeting such Israeli children, firing missiles from the Gaza Strip, even though Israel has left the area.

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