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Exchange of views on sports and human rights in the context of large sporting events

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**Adopting Human Rights Standards Can Change the Game in Sports
*Why Sports Federations Need to Play the “Long Game” for Human Rights Legacy***

I want to thank the European Parliament for taking the lead in recognizing the serious impact Mega-sporting events can have on human rights. With this hearing and previous one, you have spotlighted this moment of crisis for world sport.

I. FIFA’s Short Game Is Failing Iran’s Women

This month FIFA President Gianni Infantino was in Iran for the finals of the Asian Football Confederation tournament, and he [hailed as a “breakthrough” the presence of several hundred women](#). Women have been banned from Iran’s stadiums since 1981.

But the FIFA president’s visit didn’t actually overturn the hated ban that violates human rights and FIFA’s own Statutes—the women Mr. Infantino saw were hand-picked by Iranian authorities.

As it turns out, no women could purchase tickets to the football final, some were turned away in tears, forced on buses and driven away, and others arrested at the stadium where Infantino sat.

[Journalist Zahra Alipour](#) summed up the feeling of many Iranian women when she wrote, “Victory—or blindfold?”

For decades [Iranian women have put themselves in danger](#) to document their exclusion from stadiums—which they see as a denial of women’s rights to be part of public spaces and indeed the life of the country.

Iran’s ban on women in stadiums is a crystal-clear violation of FIFA’s Human Rights Policy and Statutes, which say such blatant discrimination is punishable “*by suspension or expulsion.*”

So it should be straightforward for FIFA to say discrimination against half the population in Iran is *not* part of the game. Among many tools, FIFA could simply deny the Iran Federation funding, deny the right to host tournaments, and undertake enforcement measures—but has so far opted to not do so.

Instead FIFA appears to be satisfied with half measures at best and to be participating in a cruel charade at worst. Commending the Iran football federation and government—abusers who have violently upheld restrictions on women for four decades—when the ban is not yet gone is damaging and insulting to Iranian women.

There is still reason to hope for real progress in overturning Iran’s stadium ban—Tehran is a true outlier now that Saudi Arabia started allowing women in stadiums since January. FIFA leaders have enormous leverage and should not declare a “breakthrough” until they have proof that all women in Iran can freely buy tickets and attend safely—and not just when Gianni Infantino is there watching.

II. Short Game vs Long Game Human Rights Reforms

I give the example of Iran because my remarks today will cover what I call the “Short Game” and the “Long Game” for human rights.

For too long, sports federations have been playing what I would call a short game: working with abusive host countries to deliver major sporting events, without regard to the existing poor human rights conditions, a legacy beyond stadiums, or the effects on the local population.

Between 2019 and 2022, Belarus, Egypt, Japan, China, and Qatar will host the most popular global sporting events, even though their governments abuse or ignore the rights of children, women, workers, journalists and civil society groups, and LGBT people. In some cases, abuse and discrimination is tied directly to the events, such as when athletes are sexually abused by coaches, schools are shuttered, families are driven from their homes by bull-dozer, or when workers die to deliver World Cup infrastructure, leaving the children they were working to support behind.

There’s a better way to play. In the “long game” approach, governments and fans, alongside human rights advocates, can demand sports governing bodies, sponsors, and host countries raise the bar. Everyone has the right to safety, dignity, and protection.

“Short game” changes and reforms may be geared to a single event, and may even result in progress such as anti-LGBT laws being temporarily suspended for the duration of a tournament or a journalist being granted a visa to cover the World Cup or the Olympics. But these short term gains are not the vision or lasting institutional changes we in the human rights community seek—and believe are now possible.

The rules of human rights apply everywhere in the world, and to everyone, just like the rules of tennis, football or the marathon. There shouldn’t be double standards in either sports or human rights.

But over the last decades, there *have* been double standards, as in Iran, and as large powers like China and Russia hosted the Olympics and the World Cup, and got away with the signature abuses Human Rights Watch has identified take place in mega-sporting events. These are:

- forced evictions without compensation,
- wage-cheating, deaths and abuses of migrant laborers building stadiums and infrastructure,
- repression of civil society,
- arrests and exclusion of journalists, and

- ugly discrimination against women and LGBT people.

We even refer to the human rights problems in sports as “Groundhog Day,” where we see the same abuses tournament after tournament—because there has not been systemic institutional change.

A “Long Game” approach is needed not least because of the growing scale of sports events. Over the last decade, the cost of mega-sporting events has escalated from \$40 billion at the 2008 Beijing Olympics to an estimated \$250 billion for the Qatar World Cup in 2022.

For migrant workers toiling in Qatar’s extreme heat, the costs are even higher: it can cost them their lives.

For the FIFA World Cup held in Russia this year, nearly half the planet tuned in.

We all enjoyed the football, but Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov was one of the big winners, rewarded with a FIFA training camp even as he mercilessly jailed rights defender Oyub Titiev. 21 workers died building Russia’s stadiums—a number the size of two football teams—and more than 110 North Korean slave laborers were found working on the St. Petersburg stadium site.

As the FIFA representative has said, FIFA worked hard to address these abuses once they were exposed, but a better way is to prevent them from happening in the first place.

III. Qatar’s World Cup, 4-year Countdown

Starting in 2012, Human Rights Watch has documented similar abuses ahead of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, where nearly a million workers are building a dozen new stadiums, and cities around the stadiums.

In August, 23-year-old Tej Narayan Tharu fell to his death building a World Cup stadium in Qatar. The Qatar World Cup will celebrate human achievement, but this young man’s family and four-year old son will have nothing to celebrate.

Although Qatar has made important reforms tied to the World Cup and with guidance from FIFA, there are clear gaps in implementation including that the *Kafala* labor sponsorship system is not yet abolished. According to Building Workers International, already 23 workers have died so far delivering the Qatar World Cup.

Reforms to protect workers from heat risks still stop at the stadium door—to cover only 2% of migrant workers— and not the massive associated infrastructure including highways, railways and hotels.

Qatar has an anti-LGBT law that criminalizes identity with 1-3 years in prison and press censorship that stems from the anti-gay law and the country’s out-of-date 1979 Press and Publications law. Moreover, Qatar bans political parties and trade unions for migrant workers, and does not grant women full rights.

There is time before 2022 to reform all of these areas, which would have a durable positive effect not just in Qatar but across the entire Gulf region.

IV. The UN Guiding Principles as a Playbook

In 2016, Harvard professor John Ruggie, the author of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, issued a bluntly worded report to FIFA that said, *“The purpose of identifying human rights risks is to do something about them.”*

A “long game” human rights strategy is geared towards a legacy beyond the event itself, beyond benefits for despots hosting, and actually delivers durable human rights improvements for the society at large. It:

- realizes the potential of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,
- consults with stakeholders and affected groups,
- embeds human rights leverage across all operations, and
- sets the bar high for hosts, participants, and all involved in the multi-billion dollar business of sports.

The new Centre for Sport and Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, the Sport and Rights Alliance, global trade unions and affected groups are all asking political leaders and leaders in sport to co uphold human rights by embedding leverage from day one.

Because of the years-long lifecycle of Mega-sporting events, there is a chance to plan far in advance not just for stadiums and infrastructure, but also for human rights. It is possible to evaluate and anticipate risks, deal with them in a preemptive way, and work to leave a legacy not just of new sports infrastructure, but also a society transformed in positive ways.

One example: After Russia brought forward an anti-gay law ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014, human rights groups pressed for non-discrimination to be written into the Olympic Charter. It is now—and could be a historic lever in the 90+ countries that still discriminate against LGBT people.

This is precisely what all sports federations need to do: Where your events contribute to human misery, discrimination, or deaths, you need to know about it, act to stop it, make it right, and be transparent about what happened.

There are examples already of federations and games that have adopted the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The Commonwealth Games Federation under CEO David Grevemberg has been an early and steadfast leader, and shown that the UNGPs work in sports as they do in business to deter and identify rights risks before they metastasize. The CGF is using upcoming Games to insist on durable rules to protect children and honor indigenous communities.

The UN Guiding Principles work for global businesses because they tell a company in advance where the problems in the system are, and ensure companies are in touch with the stakeholders who would criticize them.

Applied to Mega-sporting events, the UNGPs ensure all hosts have a duty to assess risk, monitor, and remediate abuses. Thanks to reforms in the host city contracts for the 2024 and 2028 Olympics, this is already a requirement the IOC has put in place.

Because of its position at the top of the global sports ecosystem, it is time for the IOC to go further by adopting the UN Guiding Principles across its entire operations, including the 206 National Olympic Committees. The IOC should also go beyond its observer status and join the new Centre for Sport and Human Rights.

As Olympic sponsors like Coca-Cola or Adidas can tell you, joining the international system of human rights is a process, and an occasionally challenging one.

But over time, the IOC has adopted reforms to address doping, environmental degradation, and corruption. These reforms have only made the Olympic movement stronger—and so will embracing and leading on international human rights.

V. Tokyo Summer Olympics 2020

The first test of these new policies will come with the next Olympics in Japan in 2020. This year, Japan and the Tokyo Olympic Games became the first Olympics to adopt the UNGPs, and are taking important steps to apply them for example in supply chains.

Japan is an established democracy with rule of law and an active civil society—yet has no anti-discrimination laws on sex, gender, sexual orientation, or race and ethnicity. Women, LGBT people, and people with disabilities struggle in a society that ignores or dismisses their daily challenges. The Olympic Charter’s strong language on discrimination can help level the playing field, and encourage long overdue legal reforms.

Already, the Tokyo prefecture has passed the country’s first law to protect LGBT people, and credit is due to the Olympics for this advance. Japan can and should raise the bar by adopting a national version of the same law.

The 1964 Tokyo Olympics were a watershed for Japan, as the country show-cased post-war rebuilding and technological advances. The 2020 Olympics could play a similar historic role in society, this time spotlighting inclusion, human rights and sustainability.

VI. Rights Reforms Key for Future of Mega-Sporting Events

The Beijing Winter Olympics 2022 and Qatar World Cup 2022 are both four years away—enough time for the IOC and FIFA to signal that human rights improvements must be a central legacy.

As cities in democracies put the Olympic hosting question to voters, cities are increasingly asking what benefits these mega-events bring. Just this month, residents of Calgary, Canada, voted no to hosting the 2026 Winter Games—making them the fifth city to drop out as a potential candidate.

So rights reforms and engaging with local populations is not just necessary for human rights reasons; it may actually be the key to survival of these events in countries that are not autocracies.

Consider how FIFA’s Human Rights Policy and hosting requirements for the 2026 World Cup bidding process has changed the game. Human Rights Watch has been an active stakeholder in in the 2026 bidding process the FIFA speaker described.

In June, the US, Canada and Mexico “United Bid” won the right to host the 2026 World Cup, with an ambitious Human Rights Strategy that embeds leverage by acknowledging serious human rights concerns and making improvement of them the stated goal. The United Bid is asking potential host cities to compete on human rights conditions with a scorecard.

Every country has human rights abuses. The FIFA bidding process required both Morocco and the United Bid to own up to human rights problems and map out a plan to address them over a multi-year process. This helped keep the focus on local populations and built in dialogue with potential host cities.

The United Bid that won is sustainable even with 48 teams competing—it will build no new stadiums, and has promised to address press freedom and discrimination for LGBT people, women and indigenous communities. The [United Bid Human Rights Strategy](#) is an important playbook for future bids: because it uses the process to embed human rights improvements and leverage from day one, legacy is also built in.

In sum, mega-sporting events provide us with unparalleled opportunities to bend the arc of history toward justice for children, migrant workers, women and LGBT people, those with disabilities, and marginalized members of our communities.

By drawing on the public love for and excitement of sports, as well as its principles of fair play, we can at last ensure the “long game” is a better, safer world for all. Thank you.
