

World Cup can boost fight against racism, says UN human rights chief.

The following statement has been issued by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (21 March 2010)

“The forthcoming Football World Cup in South Africa provides an opportunity both to take a fresh look at the issue of racism in sport, and to enhance sport’s tremendous potential to undermine racism, xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance in wider society.

“The symbolism of the 2010 World Cup taking place for the first time ever in an African state, and specifically in the country which was for so many years a byword for institutionalized racism, is important. It is also a factor in the choice of this year’s sports-related theme for the International Day for the Elimination against Discrimination, the date of which – 21 March – marks the anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre, when dozens of peaceful demonstrators, protesting against the ‘pass laws’ of the apartheid regime were killed by the South African police.

“Racism within sport remains a problem in many countries and many sports, and I urge sports administrators everywhere to follow the example of two of the world’s top football authorities, FIFA and UEFA, in devising serious campaigns to eradicate it from sport at all local, national and international levels.

“In recent years there have been a number of disgraceful incidents in football stadiums when fans of one team have abused footballers of opposing teams on the basis of their race. FIFA rules allow for the deduction of points where clubs have not taken sufficient action to combat racism and similar forms of bigotry, but national leagues often shy away from applying these rules.

“The same goes for national teams. On occasions, rich clubs and rich national bodies have escaped with derisory fines of a few thousand dollars after serious racist incidents during matches. I urge FIFA, UEFA and national football authorities everywhere to back their strong rhetoric with serious and consistent disincentives, including stadium bans, and point deductions. Until they do so, the admirable goal of eradicating racism in football will not be achieved.

“Despite the continuing problems still confronting football, it must be recognized that the sport has, in a number of countries, been engaged in a serious decades-long struggle against racism which has produced significant achievements, with the help of some excellent NGO initiatives and the active participation of a number of influential star players.

“On the pitch, the sight of players from diverse racial backgrounds is now the norm in many countries. Players belonging to racial minorities now fill all positions in the team, including those perceived as being more “strategic,” from which they were formerly largely excluded. However, although they are also increasingly entrusted with team captaincy, minorities are still disturbingly under-represented at the managerial level.

“The role of sports in changing attitudes towards racism is potentially immense – especially sports like football which attract huge and passionate live and TV audiences. I sincerely hope that the 2010 World Cup will not only be a successful and joyous event in its own right, but that it will also stimulate further sustained effort to eradicate racism from sport, and through this powerful vector help extend more positive attitudes towards minorities and migrants to society at large.”

ENDS