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Scar on the Beautiful Game: *Human Rights in Qatar and Beyond*

By Colin Heeneman
July 2022

Editor's note: The terms "football" (original European form) and "soccer" (American form) will be used interchangeably in the following article.



Photo by Tobias Schwartz, Reuters

Football, fútbol, voetbal, soccer, sacar, soka.

Of the many names for the world's most played sport, none are more apt than "Joga Bonito," Brazilian for "the beautiful game." It is unclear who was the first to dub football with this iconic title, but the many marvels of the game assure that it is a fitting name. That is to say, football's beauty manifests in many forms – the allure of an individual talent like Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, the fluidity of a well-coordinated team like Barcelona or Manchester City, the pure elation of a winning goal à la Sergio Agüero[1].

These reasons are fair in themselves, and yet, there is a more fundamental quality that gives football a beauty beyond all others; a quality that comes off the pitch before jerseys are donned and cleats laced. Football has captured the hearts of people across gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. From Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia, to the Americas, football has brought that sometimes elusive feeling that all humans seek – joy. A joy that has empowered the sport to bring people together – within communities and across them. Via global competition, the sport has developed an uplifting spirit of connection. Football is not just a game, but a shared human culture.

Such culture approaches its apex in the lead up to soccer's largest and most significant tournament – the quadrennial FIFA (Federation International Football Association) World Cup. A tournament in which 32 of the world's best footballing nations compete for global glory^[2]. In the months ahead of kickoff, there is nothing but peak excitement from four years of anticipation. This year is different; eagerness has been blighted by looming tensions surrounding the 2022 Cup, set to begin in November. It is not COVID-19. It is not that star players are sidelined by injury. It is not that famed footballing countries failed to qualify. No.

It is human rights. It is whether one can, really, celebrate a tournament built through abuse.

In hindsight, the abuse in the 2022 World Cup was there from the beginning. Nested, it grew out of the bidding process, organized by FIFA to select the country for hosting honors. Of course, all were surprised when a small Persian Gulf country like Qatar, with hardly any presence in international football, beat out countries such as the United States, Australia, and Japan. Post-facto investigations from the UK and US found the process was corrupted by political and commercial interests. If not surprised, fans were still appalled by the brazenness of FIFA, football's primary governing body.

Qatar's controversial "win" in the bidding process set the stage for serious loss. But not for FIFA, which was set to make billions from the tournament, and could brag about bringing the cup to a new region. Qatar's government also made out as it expects a wave of investment and economic development. It was the thousands of workers who lost that day, when former FIFA president Sepp Blatter pulled the name "Qatar" out of the host envelope. A perfect storm of political, geographic,

and socio-economic factors made migrant workers' prospects gloomy. For one, Qatar had a limited time frame to build the infrastructure required to put on one of the world's biggest sporting events. They are not akin to football-centric countries like Spain, Germany, or England that would not need to build any more stadiums. Second, Qatar is located in a climate where extreme heat is common. Summers are long and temperatures under 100 degrees Fahrenheit are *uncommon*. Third, Qatar has been heavily dependent on migrant workers to occupy the kind of labor-intensive roles that would be needed in preparations for the World Cup.

Abuse would become the rule and not the exception for migrant workers. More than any other factor, the "kafala" migrant labor system facilitated the mistreatment. In this model, migrant workers, mostly coming from Asian and African countries, pay steep recruitment fees and require a sponsor company or "kafeel" to enter Qatar's workforce^[3]. Kafala creates a stark power imbalance between employers who can revoke sponsorship at any point, and workers desperate to make a salary to send back to their families. Egregious manifestations of this system resulted in three primary issues.

First, deception was common regarding wages, worker treatment, and recruitment fees. Kafeels would entice migrants with empty promises of high wages, dignified working conditions, and they used these vows to justify recruitment fees of more than \$1,000. Second, many workers experienced overdue payments of wages or no compensation at all. Even after submitting to extremely difficult and dangerous work, some migrant workers would go months without being paid, or fell victim to wage theft by their Kafeel. Third, working conditions, particularly for the construction industry, were grueling, dangerous, and hours were extreme^[4]. With hardly any serviceable power under Kafala, workers suffered, were injured, and were pushed to the limit. As a result, tragically some workers faced a fate worse than abuse. In the years 2012 and 2013 alone, 882 migrant workers died in Qatar^[5] of "natural" or "sudden" death. Most of the victims were Nepalese and Indian men who were overworked and lived in unsanitary conditions. They were men who left home in hopes of finding dignified work and the opportunity to provide. They were men whose bodies returned home in coffins to devastated and confused families. Mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters were stripped of their people, and for what? By 2021, the death toll of migrant workers in Qatar was up to 6,500^[6]. Disregard and coercion created the playbook of worker abuse. Next would come downplay and denial.

Abuses were most severe and widespread from 2011, when preparations began, until 2017. During this time, international watchdogs such as the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International began to document and expose the suffering brought on to migrant workers in Qatar's World Cup preparations. Despite these organizations, and the media's coverage of the gross abuses ongoing in Qatar,

FIFA stayed mostly quiet. Qatari government officials would do all they could to deny and soft-pedal the extent of workers' agony, going as far as to assert that migrant mortality statistics "were in line with international best practices."^[7] Thankfully, human rights organizations, governments, and eventually players and coaches would not be fooled by FIFA and Qatar's self-serving dismissals and continued to spotlight the crisis. Qatar and FIFA's negligence was unacceptable in the view of many.

It was not until 2017, seven years into preparations, that FIFA would implement a human rights policy and work with Qatar to improve conditions for workers^[8]. Reforms were predictably weak. Qatari government officials passed labor rights reforms and claimed to have dismantled kafala, when really, they only wounded it^[9]. FIFA's rollout of its human rights and anti-discrimination campaign came off as too little, too late, like the politics of language without action. FIFA shared a problem with the Qatari government, pledges for change hardly reflected realities on the ground. Reforms for migrant workers in Qatar have been poorly enforced, with ongoing problems of wage theft and employer coercion^[10]. This is not to say that no progress has been made – human rights organizations have recognized improvements in worker conditions, and FIFA's acknowledgment of its responsibility to humanity is encouraging. However, the bar is still too low. There is much more to be done in Qatar specifically and on the part of FIFA more broadly as they continue to skirt blame for what has transpired in the gulf country.

FIFA must be held accountable for the role it has played in the abuses suffered by migrant workers and has a moral obligation to redress harm. Its responsibility derives from two failures – first, the careless screening of potential host countries, and, second, an inability to respond with urgency. Related to the former, it was a tragedy of nearsightedness that FIFA had not implemented more rigorous qualifications for host countries. Of course, given its nature as a "world" tournament, widespread access for host countries is a reasonable value, but it ought to be a value with limitations. FIFA cannot qualify countries to host its most prestigious tournament at which abuse is imminent, especially if it is unwilling to provide resources to prevent such impropriety. The organization's tepid response to the crisis is also deserving of condemnation. It was clear early on from credible reports that the situation for migrant workers in Qatar was miserable. Rather than getting ahead of the international critique, FIFA sat on its hands. When that criticism did come, FIFA was hesitant to respond, let alone act. They did not go to the Qatar steering committee right away. They did not demand expedient and drastic changes to worker treatment. They did not threaten to revoke hosting privileges in favor of other countries that were more than ready to put on the Cup. FIFA made the wrong decision in trying to pretend the problem did not exist, in dismissing how critical conditions were, and in denying responsibility.

Despite considerable mistakes, this moment is an opportunity for the world's most vital football organization. FIFA has a chance to begin making amends and transforming football for the future. The organization has admitted to making some missteps in its approach to the 2022 Cup. But we are tired of empty words. This disaster can only be solved with action. Amnesty International has suggested that FIFA match the \$440 million prize pool for the tournament as funds to be distributed among migrant workers who experienced exploitation^[1]. As a multibillion-dollar organization that will make immense profits from the tournament, this is the least FIFA can do for victims and their families. It will allow the organization to display a real acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and a commitment to fulfilling its duty to human rights. The dark human rights legacy of Qatar 2022 cannot be re-written, the abuses will be remembered even if FIFA accepts that reparations are necessary. However, reparations *can* serve to redress harm, add credence to the human rights commitment, and soften the tournament's legacy by serving as an urgent turning point for football.

FIFA's future is at risk if they believe the global community will accept mere verbal expressions of their commitment to human rights promotion. Players, and fans know what is at stake for football, they know what is at stake for human life. Such tragic violations in Qatar have marked football with a scar that will not fade easily. Exceptional contributions to the advancement of human rights will be necessary to heal that scar, to repair FIFA's reputational damage, and to bring the practice and essence of football in accord. It is a footballing essence best captured by *joga bonito*, the beautiful game. A beauty of human community and connection, a beauty presently stripped by the inhumanity of abuse.

Author's note: FIFA has not returned a request for comment on the following concerns:

- What steps are FIFA officials taking in the delivery process of the tournament to ensure the prevention of human rights abuses?
- Is FIFA considering a financial compensation package for victims of labor abuse on World Cup construction sites? What about the creation and promotion of a donation fund for migrant workers in Qatar?
- How can FIFA expect its adoption of standards for human rights to be taken seriously considering its repeated attempts to skirt responsibility and soft-pedal widely documented abuses in Qatar?

P.S. for Erie readers

I owe my existence, in small part, to the beautiful game – a game that bridged a 4,000-mile gap in my parents' birthplace. My wonderful mother, Cheryl, grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, and went on to become an ironclad defender for the

Gannon University women's soccer team. My father Michel Heeneman grew up in the Dutch city De Haag and found his way to Gannon through international recruiting and his soccer and tennis abilities. If not for football, they may have never met.

[1] (NBC Sports 2022)

[2] (Britannica 2022)

[3] (Amnesty International 2021)

[4] (Amnesty International 2021)

[5] (The Guardian 2014)

[6] (MacGillivray 2022)

[7] (Al Jazeera 2021)

[8] (FIFA 2022)

[9] (Amnesty International 2022)

[10] (Amnesty International 2021)

[11] (Amnesty International 2022)

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