

## **Open letter to South African Football Club Orlando Pirates**

By John Minto (Palestinian Solidarity Network Aotearoa)

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Kia ora from Aotearoa New Zealand,

Orlando Pirates – don't play with apartheid Israel.

I was astonished to read that your team Orlando Pirates are planning to play a "friendly" football game against an apartheid Israel football team. Are you people serious?

To us in New Zealand it's incomprehensible that a football team from a country which experienced first-hand the racism, brutality and degradation of apartheid would agree to play football with a team representing another apartheid state.

How on earth could this happen?

Just to be clear, every major international human rights organisation now recognises Israel as an apartheid state. Palestinians have always known this as spelt out recently by Palestinian human rights organisation Al Haq in a comprehensive report. Groups like Amnesty International, and US-based Human Rights Watch have said the same thing.

Israel's settler colonial regime is denying human rights to Palestinians – doesn't that sound familiar to Orlando Pirates? Wasn't it another European settler colonial regime which denied civil, political and human rights to black South Africans, just as Israel denies the same to Palestinians today?

Why hasn't Orlando Pirates been paying attention? Haven't you heard of Benjamin Netanyahu, Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich?

In the last few weeks this trio of rabid racists have been openly inciting genocide against Palestinians. Yes genocide. And all the while Israeli settlers have been conducting pogroms against Palestinian villages living under Israeli occupation.

Israeli racists will be delighted with you playing their team. Just as white South African leaders took great comfort from New Zealand All Black teams playing in apartheid South Africa, the racist Israeli leadership will applaud your "friendly" game and use false smears of antisemitism against those who speak out against it.

Didn't the world, New Zealand included, support the boycott of apartheid South Africa? Didn't we disrupt sports games played by racist South African teams to help bring international pressure for change and human rights to black South Africans?

So how is it comprehensible that in 2023 Orlando Pirates could ignore human rights for others living under apartheid and refuse to respect Palestinian calls for international boycotts of Israel to bring pressure for change?

You must surely remember this same apartheid state of Israel worked hand in glove with the apartheid South Africa regime to undermine sanctions on South Africa and provide arms to bolster the old racist state.

How many black South Africans were killed by Israeli arms and ammunition supplied to white South Africa in defiance of the United Nations arms embargo?

Palestinians are asking South Africa for the same international solidarity given to black South Africans struggling under apartheid – boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel – and Orlando Pirates should be proud to honour this request.

Sport can be a powerful force for good but in the wrong hands it can also be used help normalise racism and apartheid.

There is no place for apartheid in sport. As the non-racial SACOS (South African Council on Sport) used to say, “there can be no normal sport in an abnormal society”. This applies to Israel today just as it applied to the old South African regime.

I've read your excuses why you won't call off the match and I could hardly believe it.

“It is to the rules that Orlando Pirates went when confronted with calls to withdraw from playing Maccabi Tel Aviv. There is no cultural boycott or boycott of any form by either the South African government, Fifa or the host country that Orlando Pirates can base its refusal to play against Maccabi Tel Aviv on. Heeding a call from any other body would create a conflict within Orlando Pirates that would undermine the club's values and history irreparably”.

This is pathetic. Just what “values and history” are you talking about? If the world had waited for our governments and sporting groups like FIFA to impose boycotts then black South Africans could even today still live under the yoke of apartheid. It was sports clubs and community groups around the world which led and drove the international campaign to boycott apartheid South Africa and bring great pressure for change. International sports organisations were the last to the issue.

Orlando Pirates – take a lead for Palestinians. Stand up for what is right. Be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Don't play the apartheid game.

Nā,

John Minto

National Chair

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*John Minto is former National Organiser for HART (Halt All Racist Tours) which successfully campaigned to stop rugby contact between New Zealand and apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. He is currently National Chair of the Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa in New Zealand.*

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