

South African Gaza Resident Pours Feelings Out Over Pirates

By Haidar Eid

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An open letter from a South African Gaza resident to Orlando Pirates over the planned Israeli game

My Name is Haidar Eid, a South African citizen of Palestinian origin. I am a graduate of the University of Johannesburg from where I got my PhD and taught South African students at the Soweto campus.

I have been residing and working in besieged Gaza since 2005. I also happened to be an Orlando Pirates fan!

It is with a heavy heart that I have learned of your decision to play a “friendly” match with apartheid Israel’s representative Maccabi Tel Aviv on July 13.

I have read your justification and I am sorry to say it fits the definition of “constructive engagement” that all oppressed South Africans fought against. Let me brief you on our life here in besieged Gaza.

There are inevitable consequences for our sporting life while we suffer shortages of all kinds due to the 16-year long illegal and genocidal Israeli Siege on the Gazan population, in complete violation of Article 33 of the Geneva Conventions against collective punishment.

Some of our national football team heroes were among those killed by Israel. More people were injured and many requiring leg amputations, the joy of football or any sporting activity all but destroyed for them.

Despite the grief, the injustice and the deprivation of so many of the most basic human freedoms, our football will always continue one way or another within the Gaza Strip.

The majority of us in Gaza are United Nations registered refugees, ethnically cleansed by the nascent Israeli army in 1948. Had we had the right to return to our homes as called for by United Nations Resolution 194 we may have seen our national football team, ‘Palestine’ participating in a World Cup.

You must be aware of the many examples when Israel refuses to allow members of the Palestinian national team to travel from Gaza to join the national team. Israel’s mantra is that the players are denied access for “security reasons”, claiming they do not have the correct permit, reminiscent of the notorious racist “pass law” in Apartheid South Africa.

The uncertainties from refused permissions to leave and enter the Strip and the changing severity of the Israeli Siege and Occupation are a major impediment and as a result the West Asian Union Federation does not always schedule games involving our teams.

In 2007, the national team was prevented from travelling to play a World Cup Qualifier in Singapore and eliminated, and in May 2008 for the AFC Challenge Cup denying them qualification for the 2011 Asia Cup.

In July 2009, only one of the 30 best Gazan players, Mahmoud Sersik, was granted permission to enter the West Bank. As he crossed the Erez checkpoint to enter Israel he was immediately arrested and has been in an Israeli prison ever since.

Our Olympic players from Gaza have been barred from entry to the West Bank and the youth teams have frequently been denied exit and re-entry.

During one of apartheid Israel's criminal attacks on Gaza our national stadium was targeted and destroyed, as was the Palestinian Football Association building.

A new stadium planned to be built in Gaza, Beit Lahiya, was ceased because of the continuing Israeli siege, which still bans concrete from entering the Gaza Strip along with sports equipment.

When concrete finally arrives, the priority will undoubtedly be to rebuild the thousands of destroyed or damaged houses, schools, hospitals and mosques caused by Israel's bombing.

Of course, the effects are not limited to football. The lower profile of other sports means that participation internationally is a distant dream.

Numerous campaigns such as "Unite against Racism", have helped to stamp out racism in European football with some success, and football has always been a beacon of multi-ethnicity in the most global of sports.

Clubs are punished and banned for racist behaviour and UEFA recently backed referees to have the power to stop games for racist behaviour.

Sadly, it is racism at the heart of why our teams cannot play abroad, why our sporting equipment does not arrive, why our stadiums do not get built or why our football season ends prematurely through resource shortages or violent attacks.

We, the Palestinians are the undesired "ethnic group" for the Israeli authorities who control our lives, in evidence by the unequal treatment and dehumanisation which pervades our life under their military occupation, siege and forced exile as refugees.

This what you expected from international clubs last century, and we Palestinians are expecting no less from our brothers and sisters in post-apartheid South Africa.

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