Profit Over People

The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup



SPORT & RIGHTS ALLIANCE

RAISING THE BAR FOR SPORT, HUMAN RIGHTS AND TRANSPARENCY

fse football supporters europe



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We are the Sport & Rights Alliance. Raising the bar for sport, human rights and transparency since 2015.

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Sport & Rights Alliance
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About the Sport & Rights Alliance

The Sport & Rights Alliance's mission is to promote the rights and well-being of those most affected by human rights risks associated with the delivery of sport. Our partners include Amnesty International, The Athlete Survivors' Assist, Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI), Football Supporters Europe, Human Rights Watch, ILGA World (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), the International Trade Union Confederation, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Transparency International, and World Players Association, UNI Global Union. As a global coalition of leading NGOs and trade unions, the Sport & Rights Alliance works together to ensure sports bodies, governments, and other relevant stakeholders give rise to a world of sport that protects, respects, and fulfills international standards for human rights, labor rights, child rights, wellbeing and safeguarding, and anti-corruption.

About Football Supporters Europe (FSE)

Football Supporters Europe (FSE) is the democratic voice of football supporters across Europe. FSE is an independent, non-profit association representing supporters in more than 50 UEFA nations and works to ensure that fans are recognized as stakeholders in the governance of football. FSE advocates for supporters' rights, safe and accessible football, inclusion and non-discrimination, affordable access to matches, and greater supporter participation in decision-making. Through advocacy, research, campaigns, and engagement with football governing bodies, FSE works to promote good governance, democracy, solidarity, and a football culture that is inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to the people at the heart of the game. FSE is a founder of the Sport & Rights Alliance and co-sponsor of this report.

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I. Executive Summary



On March 18, 2027, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) will hold its 13th presidential election at the 77th FIFA Congress in Rabat – a pivotal moment in FIFA's future. The election comes amid one of the worst governance crises FIFA has faced over the past 10 years. As the Sport & Rights Alliance reported in August 2026, the controversy over President Gianni Infantino's FIFA Forward Enterprise, a since-withdrawn proposal to establish a corporate subsidiary that would be open to external investors and oversee the organization's commercial and tournament operations, highlighted internal shortcomings concerning transparency, accountability, conflicts of interest, and the concentration of power within FIFA.[1]

These revelations unfolded in the wake of the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup, a 48-nation, 104-match tournament hosted for the first time in three countries: Mexico, Canada, and the United States. After the grave human rights violations at past tournaments, this year's World Cup was supposed to be a game-changer for human rights.[2] FIFA presented the 2026 mega sporting event as one that would demonstrate that "football is for all"[3] and, for the first time, the international federation recognized and embedded international business and human rights standards through its adoption of an overarching 2017 Human Rights Policy[4] and a dedicated tournament-specific Human Rights Framework for local Host Committees.[5]

According to the Sport & Rights Alliance's analysis, the 2026 Men's World Cup exposed how the failure of FIFA's leadership to take ownership of its human rights responsibilities, seeming to prioritize record revenues over fairness and equality, led to a fundamental gap between FIFA's human rights policies and their substantive implementation. FIFA relied heavily on host governments, local authorities and non-governmental stakeholders, local to international, to stand up solutions to mitigate the risks of potential harms from the tournament and fulfill the international federation's human rights standards – without implementing sufficiently clear guidelines, oversight, funding, or consequences for non-compliance. Whereas FIFA's human rights staff made credible efforts to address crisis situations, this approach ultimately failed to systemically prevent and remedy abuses when pressure-tested by the unfavorable human rights environments in the host countries, most notably in the United States – host of the vast majority of matches, including the semi-final and final.

1 FIFA, "FIFA intends to expand football development funding to over USD 10 billion subject to approval by FIFA Member Associations," July 28, 2026, https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/media-releases/intends-expand-football-development-funding-usd-10-billion-subject-approval-member-associations.

2 Amnesty International UK, "FIFA: Coalition Demands Systemic Reform to End Cycle of Corruption and Rights Abuses," August 6, 2026, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/latest/fifa-coalition-demands-systemic-reform-to-end-cycle-of-corruption-and-rights-abuses/.

3 FIFA, "President Infantino Hails 'Togetherness and Unity' Message as 2026 Brand Revealed," May 17, 2023, https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/president/news/president-infantino-hails-togetherness-and-unity-message-as-2026-brand-revealed.

4 FIFA, *FIFA Human Rights Policy*, 2017, https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/FIFAs_Human_Rights_Policy_0.pdf.

5 FIFA, *FWC26 Human Rights Framework*, June 2024, https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/494d934f7de1bad/original/FWC26-Human-Rights-Framework_Final_EN_24-July-2024.pdf.

Supporters, athletes, team staff, referees, and journalists were negatively impacted by host countries' visa restrictions, entry requirements, prolonged border questioning, visa denials, and travel restrictions based on nationality. These barriers were particularly consequential for people from countries subject to heightened immigration restrictions, including several World Cup participants. Host-country immigration enforcement and policing also created uncertainty around the threat of detention and deportation for attendees, including traveling supporters, workers and residents of host cities, as well as the right to free protest. Yet FIFA remained silent about the risks of discriminatory treatment for World Cup participants, especially in the U.S., and actively chose to endorse and support President Trump by creating and awarding him the so-called "FIFA Peace Prize."[6]

Within FIFA's own control, its human rights commitments were not translated fully into effective protections. FIFA's accreditation, grievance, safeguarding, accessibility, and human rights systems were often difficult to understand, access, or challenge in practice. Supporters and stadium workers reported limited visibility of grievance mechanisms; journalists encountered an opaque accreditation process; and accessibility barriers persisted for supporters with disabilities despite FIFA's commitment to inclusion. FIFA additionally failed to provide adequate clarity around safeguarding and eligibility procedures for athletes, specifically in cases involving serious allegations against players.

More broadly, the tournament revealed weaknesses in FIFA's organizational oversight, transparency, and accountability, alongside a lack of leadership at the highest level to ensure these responsibilities were consistently upheld. The result was a tournament that placed profit over people, where access and participation were shaped by economic status, nationality, immigration status, disability, gender identity and sexual orientation, political circumstance, or the discretion of individual authorities.

As FIFA approaches its next presidential election and looks toward the 2027 Women's World Cup in Brazil, candidates have both an opportunity and an imperative to lead a long-overdue systemic reform and finally embed human rights and transparency at the heart of world football. Other international sport governing bodies—especially the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in advance of the 2028 Los Angeles Summer Olympics—have a unique opportunity to learn from this year's World Cup and strengthen their own human rights processes to ensure that the right systems are in place ahead of the delivery of future major sporting events. It is critical for international sports bodies to balance the protection of participants with profits, and to do so using an effective human rights framework.

6 FIFA, "President Trump Receives Inaugural FIFA Peace Prize," December 5, 2025, https://inside.fifa.com/campaigns/football-unites-the-world/news/president-trump-peace-prize-football-unites-the-world.

II. Methodology


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This report draws on independent monitoring of the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup by the Sport & Rights Alliance, including Football Supporters Europe and other partners; global news outlets' World Cup coverage; publications from NGOs and human rights organizations; and interviews with leading sports rights experts, human rights advocates, and reports from fan federation representatives who attended the tournament.

Given the enormous scale and impact of the 2026 Men's World Cup – the largest mega-sporting event in history – there are a vast number of human rights issues this report could address. This report should not be read as an exhaustive account of all human rights impacts, but rather a complement to the vital recommendations of other human rights experts and civil society organizations, including, but not limited to, the Centre for Sport and Human Rights, the Dignity 2026 Coalition, and local stakeholders and impacted groups in each of the 16 host cities.

We acknowledge FIFA's important human rights efforts since its first reforms in 2016, as well as the dedication of its under-resourced human rights team. This report is not intended to provide a comprehensive account of FIFA's efforts, but to identify gaps between its human rights responsibilities and their implementation in practice. We hope FIFA's own report will highlight what worked and complement our recommendations by identifying key opportunities and commitments to deliver stronger implementation in future editions.

III. Background



By the time FIFA had awarded the 2026 tournament to the "United Bid" of Canada, Mexico, and the United States in 2018, the international federation had committed to delivering an event with unprecedented human rights provisions and protections. Following the worst corruption crisis in the organization's history,[7] FIFA commissioned a report by Professor John Ruggie, "For the Game. For the World,"[8] and endorsed the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs)[9] by revising Article 3 of its governing Statutes, committing future events "to respecting all internationally recognised human rights."[10] At the institutional level, FIFA hired a Human Rights Manager, established a Human Rights Advisory Board (HRAB), and adopted a first-of-its-kind Human Rights Policy in 2017 stating that its human rights commitments are binding on all FIFA bodies and officials.[11]

The 2026 Men's World Cup bidding process represented the first opportunity to operationalize FIFA's new recognition of its human rights responsibilities. FIFA's "Bid to Host" guide made human rights criteria a mandatory component of a successful World Cup bid, requiring prospective hosts to submit a comprehensive human rights strategy complete with a full list of consulted stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and human rights advocacy groups.[12] Following selection, FIFA would ask host city committees to develop Human Rights Action Plans (HRAPs) to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for potential human rights violations at and around tournament venues.[13]

In 2018, the United Bid published its "Proposal for a United Human Rights Strategy," committing the three countries to following FIFA's human rights guidelines throughout the planning, preparation, and execution of the tournament.[14] The United Bid positioned their potential sites as well-suited to hosting the first World Cup under FIFA's Human Rights Policy, citing Human Rights Watch's cautious endorsement of the countries' constitutional protections and democratic institutions (p. 10).[15] In June 2018, FIFA selected the United Bid, with the United States slated to host 78 of the tournament's 104 matches.

7 Tariq Panja, "FIFA Officials Took Bribes for World Cup Votes, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/sports/soccer/qatar-and-russia-bribery-world-cup-fifa.html.

8 John G. Ruggie, *"For the Game. For the World." FIFA and Human Rights*, Corporate Responsibility Initiative Report No. 68 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School), 2016, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Ruggie_humanrightsFIFA_reportApril2016.pdf.

9 United Nations, *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework*, 2011, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/720245.

10 FIFA, *FIFA Statutes: Regulations Governing the Application of the Statutes Standing Orders of the Congress,* 2024, https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/16d1f7349fa19ade/original/FIFA-Statutes-2024.pdf.

11 FIFA, *FIFA Human Rights Policy*, 2017, https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/FIFAs_Human_Rights_Policy_0.pdf.

12 FIFA, "FIFA Publishes Guide to Bidding Process for the 2026 FIFA World Cup," November 7, 2017, https://inside.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/canadamexicousa2026/news/fifa-publishes-guide-to-bidding-process-for-the-2026-fifa-world-cuptm-2916170.

13 Human Rights Watch, "World Cup 2026: FIFA Needs to Act on Human Rights," December 3, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/03/world-cup-2026-fifa-needs-to-act-on-human-rights.

14 United Bid, *Proposal for a United Human Rights Strategy*, https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/35837f1073bdad15/original/s2xnrvfjg9kp0zelhxnt-pdf.pdf.

15 Ibid.

The guarantees written into the United Bid's strategy, however, proved inadequate at protecting against the human rights backlash in the coming years. Since 2017, the U.S. government has adopted policies and dismantled protections that directly conflict with the host country's obligation to safeguard marginalized and immigrant communities, as outlined in the United Bid's strategy,[16] as well as FIFA's 2024 "FWC26 Human Rights Framework."[17] In the years that followed, the primary host country also fell from 45th to 64th in Reporters Without Borders (RSF)'s Press Freedom Index, and journalists faced violence, detention, and deportation while reporting on U.S. protests.[18] More broadly, mass deportations and the expansion of U.S. detention centers, some proximal to World Cup stadiums, inspired widespread fear in the country's immigrant populations, which also comprise a significant portion of World Cup football fans in the U.S., and contributed to an overall uptick in the "violent repression of peaceful protests," per a 2026 Amnesty International report.[19] From January 20, 2025 to March 10, 2026, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested at least 167,000 people in and around the 11 U.S. cities where games would be played, based on ICE data provided in response to a freedom of information request to the Deportation Data Project and analyzed by Human Rights Watch.[20] Host city Miami, where FIFA was headquartered throughout the tournament, saw more than 37,000 ICE arrests in this period, the highest of all U.S. World Cup host cities.[21] In response to these activities, Human Rights Watch, one of the stakeholders consulted for the United Bid, published "The World Cup Needs an ICE Truce" in April 2026,[22] and wrote in its World Report 2026 that the U.S. government displays a "blatant disregard for human rights."[23]

In Mexico, Amnesty International raised concerns about the deployment of approximately 100,000 security personnel for the World Cup, including military forces, and the potential repression of peaceful protests, including demonstrations in the three host cities by families seeking answers about Mexico's tens of thousands of disappeared people.[24] For the Canadian leg of the tournament, Amnesty warned that preparations could contribute to the displacement of people experiencing homelessness, and also documented concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, migrant and refugee rights, and rising cases of discrimination against the LGBTI+ community.[25] In March 2026, Amnesty International called on FIFA to "use their significant leverage to protect fans, players, journalists, workers and local communities" across all three host countries.[26]

16 Ibid.

17 FIFA, *FWC26 Human Rights Framework*, June 2024, https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/494d934f7de1bad/original/FWC26-Human-Rights-Framework_Final_EN_24-July-2024.pdf.

18 Reporters Without Borders (RSF), "2026 World Press Freedom Index: 25-Year Low," 2026, https://rsf.org/en/2026-rsf-index-press-freedom-25-year-low.

19 Amnesty International, "USA: Amnesty International Calls for ICE to Be Abolished After Documenting Widespread Human Rights Violations in Anti-Immigrant Operations," September 24, 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/09/ee-uu-amnistia-internacional-pide-la-disolucion-del-ice-tras-documentar-violaciones-generalizadas-de-derechos-humanos-en-operaciones-contra-inmigrantes/.

20 Human Rights Watch, "World Cup 2 Months Out: FIFA and Host Cities Sideline Rights," April 10, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/10/world-cup-2-months-out-fifa-and-host-cities-sideline-rights.

21 Ibid.

22 Minky Worden, "The World Cup Needs an ICE Truce," Human Rights Watch, April 7, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/07/the-world-cup-needs-an-ice-truce.

23 Human Rights Watch, "United States," in *World Report 2026*, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/united-states.

24 Amnesty International, "Humanity Must Win: Defending Rights, Tackling Repression at the 2026 FIFA World Cup," March 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior10/0837/2026/en/.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

Early Warning Signs



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The 2025 FIFA Club World Cup, held across 12 U.S. cities, provided an early indication of how the evolving political and human rights landscape in the U.S. could impact future international sporting events. Namely, the threats of federal immigration agencies' presence at and around stadiums sent a strong message to foreign and immigrant fans. In a since-deleted Facebook post, U.S. Customs and Border Protection wrote that they would be "suited and booted to provide security for the first round of games," using the hashtag "#CPFxFIFA."[27] As the event progressed, Human Rights Watch reported on a father seized by ICE while planning to take his children to the Club World Cup final at MetLife Stadium, who was later deported; he warned other immigrant fans against attending the 2026 games.[28] The lack of transparency and clarity around ICE's presence and other interventions by the U.S. government were the predominant concern expressed to FIFA in the 145 human rights complaints the international federation received during the club tournament.[29]

FIFA additionally dropped its anti-racism and anti-discrimination campaign during the 2025 Club World Cup, a decision made amidst the Trump administration's push to dismantle federal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and policies.[30] The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) World's Senior Specialist on Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics, Lily Dong Li Rosengard, told the Sport & Rights Alliance that FIFA's decision "set a negative tone and stage for the 2026 tournament" in terms of inclusion and safeguarding against national human rights backlash.

27 Migrant Insider, "Border Patrol's FIFA World Cup [Facebook Post]," June 13, 2025, https://migrantinsider.com/p/border-patrol-s-fifa-world-cup.

28 Human Rights Watch, "US: ICE Arrest at FIFA Event Spotlights Dangers for World Cup," December 3, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/03/us-ice-arrest-at-fifa-event-spotlights-dangers-for-world-cup.

29 Adam Crafton, "FIFA faces fresh human rights concerns ahead of 2026 World Cup," *The Athletic*, September 23, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6651989/2025/09/23/fifa-human-rights-concerns/.

30 Adam Crafton, "FIFA Drops Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination Messaging at Club World Cup," *The Athletic*, June 16, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6430673/2025/06/16/fifa-club-world-cup-racism-discrimination-message/.

While human rights concerns mounted in the months leading up to the tournament, host cities failed to deliver timely, comprehensive, or effective Human Rights Action Plans (HRAPs), an explicit commitment made by the United Bid and requested by FIFA under the Human Rights Framework.[31] Two months before the first match, only four of the 16 host cities had publicly released their plans.[32] Advocacy groups identified missing elements of the plans that were published, as well as instances in which cities had already departed from their commitments. YWCA Toronto, for example, criticized the city's action plan for failing to adequately protect against the anticipated uptick in gender-based violence during the tournament.[33] In Atlanta, advocates highlighted the sudden removal of unhoused people's belongings from a public park near a popular World Cup watch-party site,[34] a stark departure from the city's stated commitment to work alongside unhoused residents "to develop approaches that are sustainable, effective, and grounded in dignity."[35] Amnesty International raised similar concerns about Vancouver's published strategy after local organizations warned that World Cup preparations would lead to "street sweeps" and the confiscation of items belonging to people experiencing homelessness in the city's Downtown Eastside.[36]

The Dignity 2026 Coalition – a collective of organizations, including the Sport & Rights Alliance, advocating for human and labor rights at the World Cup – raised the specific concern that host cities had not published their plans for protecting workers' rights before tournament preparations began, nor had they engaged in meaningful, participatory engagement with community groups.[37] These learnings came in the wake of the workers' rights crisis surrounding the 2022 Qatar World Cup, where thousands of migrant workers died undocumented and uncompensated during construction of tournament facilities.[38] As Human Rights Watch's Director of Global Initiatives Minky Worden warned in April 2026, "FIFA and these cities need to act immediately to strengthen human rights protections or risk a tournament defined by exclusion and fear."[39]

One area where FIFA established a more structured model of external labour-rights engagement was through its cooperation with the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI). Under the BWI-FIFA cooperation framework,[40] international and national trade union representatives were given access to World Cup-related worksites, management and workers, enabling external trade union monitoring of occupational safety and health (OSH) conditions and direct engagement

31 United Bid, *Proposal for a United Human Rights Strategy*, https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/35837f1073bdad15/original/s2xnrvfjg9kp0zelhxnt--pdf.pdf.

32 Human Rights Watch, "World Cup 2 Months Out: FIFA and Host Cities Sideline Rights," April 10, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/10/world-cup-2-months-out-fifa-and-host-cities-sideline-rights.

33 Deepa Mattoo and Sami Pritchard, "[Op-Ed:] Toronto's FIFA Planning Fails to Prevent Gender-Based Violence," *Toronto Today*, June 27, 2026, https://www.torontotoday.ca/local/opinion/op-ed-toronto-failed-prevent-gender-based-violence-world-cup-12477053.

34 Timothy Pratt, "Outcry after Atlanta Tosses Unhoused People's Belongings Near World Cup Spot," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jul/12/atlanta-park-sweep-world-cup.

35 City of Atlanta, *ATL26 Human Rights Action Plan*, March 9, 2026, https://www.atlantaga.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/67944/639086484552170000.

36 Amnesty International, "Humanity Must Win: Defending Rights, Tackling Repression at the 2026 FIFA World Cup," March 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior10/0837/2026/en/.

37 Human Rights Watch, "FIFA: Publish Robust Rights Framework for 2026 World Cup," May 16, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/16/fifa-publish-robust-rights-framework-2026-world-cup.

38 Michael Page and Minky Worden, "Qatar World Cup Chief Publicly Admits High Migrant Death Toll," Human Rights Watch, November 30, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/30/qatar-world-cup-chief-publicly-admits-high-migrant-death-tolls.

39 Human Rights Watch, "World Cup 2 Months Out: FIFA and Host Cities Sideline Rights," April 10, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/10/world-cup-2-months-out-fifa-and-host-cities-sideline-rights.

40 FIFA, "BWI and FIFA sign groundbreaking agreement to advance workers' rights at FIFA tournaments," October 22, 2025, https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/media-releases/bwi-groundbreaking-agreement-advance-workers-rights-fifa-tournaments.

with workers. Because the agreement was reached relatively late in the preparation cycle, the inspections did not cover the main stadium construction phase, but focused primarily on temporary infrastructure, overlay works and tournament readiness. An earlier inspection in Monterrey took place when renovation works were already nearing completion.[41]

The 2026 inspections in Mexico City, Vancouver and Los Angeles demonstrated both the value of this access and the differences that can exist between sites.[42] At Mexico City Stadium, inspectors identified significant gaps between OSH policies and practice, particularly across subcontracting arrangements, including weaknesses in traffic management, PPE, worker welfare, heat protection, communication and worker participation. At the same time, workers could be interviewed directly, and FIFA, venue management and contractors engaged openly with the findings and corrective recommendations. In Vancouver, the overall management system was robust, with evidence of contractor screening and good OSH management, although the inspection still identified operational risks and scope for stronger workforce consultation. Los Angeles provided a case study of how worker participation can contribute to prevention. The inspection found a mature and integrated OSH system, with dynamic risk assessment, coordinated contractor management, strong leadership engagement and worker participation embedded in day-to-day operations. Unionised labour contributed positively to communication, accountability and workforce engagement, while workers were encouraged to report hazards and near misses and heat stress prevention formed part of routine planning.

The differing findings across the three host countries highlighted a broader challenge for FIFA: ensuring that labour standards are implemented consistently across different regulatory environments, contractors and delivery models. It also demonstrated the potential legacy of the cooperation. Practices, lessons and worker-participation approaches developed through the inspection process can inform future projects in host countries and strengthen prevention in future FIFA tournaments.

The unprecedented ICE activity before the World Cup, alongside official anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric and other human rights backlash, prompted travel advisories against the U.S. from foreign countries, including Canada,[43] Germany, the UK, Denmark, and Finland.[44] Additionally, over 120 civil society groups signed a World Cup-specific travel warning against the main host country, stating that the “deteriorating human rights situation in the U.S. could put people in host cities at risk.”[45]

41 BWI, “FIFA World Cup 2026: BWI Concludes First Official Visit to BBVA Stadium in Monterrey, Mexico”, December 4, 2025, https://www.bwint.org/BwiNews/NewsDetails?newsId=995.

42 BWI, “BWI Affiliates Carry out First Joint FIFA World Cup 2026 Labour and OSH Visits Across North America”, May 28, 2026, https://www.bwint.org/BwiNews/NewsDetails?newsId=1308.

43 Elizabeth Thompson, “Canada Issues Travel Warning for United States,” *CBC Canada*, October 1, 2025, https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-united-states-travel-warning-1.7648381.

44 Samir Muratovic, “Updated Travel Advice for Travelling to the US,” Schlun & Elseven Legal, April 9, 2025, https://se-legal.de/updated--travel-advice-for-travelling-to-the-us/.

45 Jamil Dakwar, “Over 120 Civil Society Groups Issue Travel Advisory for U.S. Ahead of FIFA World Cup,” American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), April 23, 2026, https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/over-120-civil-society-groups-issue-travel-advisory-for-u-s-ahead-of-fifa-world-cup.

LGBTI+ Fan Groups Advise Fans Against World Cup Travel



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England's Three Lions Pride, the LGBTI+ supporter group for the national football team and member of Football Supporters Europe, announced that its fanbase would not travel together to the World Cup due to rising cases of homophobia and transphobia in the U.S.[46] Robert*, a member of Three Lions Pride, told Amnesty International: "As a queer person, I would not be able to visibly be myself in a number of World Cup locations, and that is directly down to policymakers, law enforcement and the direction of travel in the US."[47]

*Pseudonym provided for safety reasons.

The human rights risks of the 2026 World Cup were visible in the adverse human rights conditions in the hosting countries, the failure of host cities to realize their own human rights obligations, and the myriad statements of foreign governments and human rights organizations. Despite this, FIFA's leadership publicly dismissed any concerns at the opening press conference, when President Infantino urged fans and stakeholders worried about immigration and border problems to simply "chill and relax."[48]

46 Three Lions Pride, "Three Lions Pride Statement on 2026 Men's World Cup", January 15, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DTiY95YiP5y

47 Amnesty International, "This World Cup Has Disenfranchised LGBT+ Fans Like No Other," June 10, 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2026/06/this-world-cup-has-disenfranchised-lgbt-fans-like-no-other/.

48 Matt Hughes, "Gianni Infantino tells football fans to 'chill' in response to Fifa's critics," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2026/jun/10/gianni-infantino-fifa-criticism-2026-world-cup.

IV. A World Cup Without the World



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Delivering on claims that the 2026 tournament would be the "most inclusive FIFA World Cup ever" would require diverse fan representation and unfettered participation by qualifying teams, match officials and the international press.[49] Yet evidence from the tournament indicates that cost and accessibility barriers, discriminatory visa denials, anti-immigration policies, and border controls created an uneven playing field for access both on and off the pitch.

Pricing Fans out of the World Cup

FIFA's excessively expensive pricing policy, coupled with the cost of traveling between matches across three countries, and fees associated with obtaining a visa, deterred international supporters from attending the 2026 Men's World Cup, particularly those who faced substantial upfront visa fees without any guarantee they would be permitted to enter the U.S.

The scale of the 2026 tournament and FIFA's uncapped ticket pricing model made it the most expensive World Cup to attend in history.[50] In an interview for this report, Football Supporters Europe (FSE)'s Executive Director Ronan Evain said that ticket prices alone had a dampening effect on fans' willingness to attend: "When [FIFA made] the announcement of the ticket prices… people realized, 'oh, I actually can't afford this at all.'" Unlike previous tournaments held in Germany, Russia, and Qatar, the three host countries did not provide free inter-city transportation for supporters traveling between matches. Instead, fans incurred the cost of moving between host cities, adding to the already high expense of attending multiple games.[51]

49 FIFA, "Gianni Infantino says FIFA World Cup 2026™ will be 'an unforgettable experience' as kick-off approaches," May 13, 2026, https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/president/news/infantino-world-cup-2026-fanatics-global-citizen-chris-martin.

50 Antonio Pequeño IV, "Tickets for World Cup Final, the Most Expensive U.S. Sporting Event Ever, Rise 46%," *Forbes*, July 18, 2026, https://www.forbes.com/sites/antoniopequenoiv/2026/07/18/tickets-for-world-cup-final-the-most-expensive-us-sporting-event-ever-rise-46/.

51 RJ Rico and Jeff McMurray, "World Cup transit sticker shock hits fans with tickets to matches in some US host cities," *Associated Press*, May 27, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/world-cup-transit-new-jersey-boston-prices-f66d51bf1ed1de1bf568ac4fd319b8f8.

An Unprecedented Cost of Admission[52]

World Cup	Highest published/official ticket price
U.S./Canada/Mexico (2026)	$10,990
Qatar (2022)	~$1,607
Russia (2018)	~$1,100

For international fans attending matches in the U.S., visa requirements added another layer of cost and uncertainty. International ticketholders needed either a valid U.S. visa or authorization through the Visa Waiver Program (VWP).[53] Nationality determined which supporters could access the simpler and less costly VWP process and which faced the full visa process. According to the BBC, only 42 "generally wealthier" countries qualified for the program, which costs around $40 USD.[54] Supporters from other countries, including every African nation, were required to pay $185 USD for the U.S. visa application required for the FIFA PASS, a priority access avenue to a U.S. visa interview, in addition to attending the in-person interview that could itself require travel and other expenditures.[55] For travelers from the 50 countries subject to the U.S. "Visa Bond Pilot Program," the financial burden was even greater, as applicants who did not purchase a match ticket ahead of time were required to post bonds of $5,000 to $15,000 to obtain a tourist visa.[56] The impact of these costs was not merely theoretical: the mother of Cape Verde's national team goalkeeper, Vozinha, was unable to attend her son's "man-of-the-match" opening match because she encountered issues with the expense of the U.S. visa process and associated bond - although she was later able to attend their second group stage match.[57]

52 Sophia Vesely, "How Outrageous Ticket Prices for 2026 World Cup Final Compare to Past Years," *Sports Illustrated*, April 4, 2026, https://www.si.com/soccer/how-outrageous-ticket-prices-for-2026-world-cup-final-compare-to-past-years.

53 Nadia Huraimi, "'A World Cup for them not us': Fans' anger at US travel bans and visa restrictions," *BBC News*, June 7, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx212p8r28eo.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Colin Millar and Henry Bushnell, "Mother of Cape Verde Goalkeeper Vozinha Unable to Attend World Cup After U.S. Visa Issue," *The Athletic*, June 17, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7369361/2026/06/17/vozinha-cape-verde-goalkeeper-mother-visa-us/.

57 Ibid.

The prospect of paying these expenses without knowing whether a visa would ultimately be approved imposed a specific constraint on supporters from countries with high visa refusal rates. A *BBC* analysis of State Department data found that citizens of 11 of the 48 countries that qualified for the World Cup faced U.S. visa rejection rates above 40%: Ecuador, Egypt, Haiti, Algeria, Uzbekistan, Cape Verde, Jordan, Iran, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, and Senegal.[58] For fans from these countries, the possibility of losing visa fees, the cost of match tickets, flights, and accommodations made planning a trip financially perilous and even impossible.

Available data suggests that these pre-tournament financial and logistical barriers negatively affected demand among international fans requiring visas. On April 4, 2026, the U.S. State Department reported to *NBC 5* that it had received only 16,000 FIFA PASS applications from 140 countries.[59] While this figure cannot fully illustrate how many ticket holders applied for or obtained visas, it indicates relatively limited uptake of the FIFA PASS process compared with the 6,810,966 global spectators who attended World Cup matches.[60]

Excluding Fans with Disabilities

For fans with disabilities, FIFA's ticket pricing structure made attending the tournament financially inaccessible for many. In December 2025, FSE's Disability & Inclusion Fan Network wrote to President Infantino urging FIFA to reduce accessible ticket prices, cap accessibility ticket resale prices at face value, and reinstate free companion tickets.[61] In the U.S., these barriers explicitly violated the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which imposes requirements for sporting and entertainment venues, including accessible seats sold under the same conditions as other tickets and at no higher price than comparable seats, as well as available companion seating.[62] As FSE's Network Coordinator James Flanagan said in an interview for this report, "These structures are in total contradiction with [FIFA's] commitments…the international federation failed on all levels." According to FSE Network member Jo McNicol, this decision was specifically disappointing given that the U.S. is a generally more disability-friendly location than past World Cup host countries. For many fans with disabilities, including McNicol, this tournament would have been an exciting attendance opportunity due to U.S. accommodations such as "hotels with accessible rooms" and "buses with a ramp on it," had it not been for these exclusionary, profit-maximizing policies.

The obstacles for fans with disabilities extended beyond steep ticketing prices. As Flanagan described to the Sport & Rights Alliance, the lack of clear communication from FIFA, host cities, and stadiums regarding accessibility measures, especially surrounding whether a purchased companion seat would be situated beside the fan requiring support,[63] imposed challenges to attendance that could not be solved simply by having the financial means to buy market-price

58 Nadia Huraimi, "'A World Cup for them not us': Fans' anger at US travel bans and visa restrictions," *BBC News*, June 7, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx212p8r28eo.

59 Alex Silverman, "U.S. Government's Early Data Shows No Clear World Cup Travel Spike," *Sports Business Journal*, April 24, 2026, https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Articles/2026/04/24/us-governments-early-data-shows-no-clear-world-cup-travel-spike/.

60 *Note: On August 14, 2026, the Sport & Rights Alliance sent a formal request to FIFA for aggregate data on World Cup FIFA PASS and visa outcomes but has not received a response to date.*

61 Football Supporters Europe, "FIFA's Ticketing Policy Is Excluding Fans with Disabilities from the 2026 World Cup," December 16, 2025, https://www.fanseurope.org/news/fifas-ticketing-policy-is-excluding-fans-with-disabilities-from-the-2026-world-cup/.

62 U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, "The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)," 1990, https://www.ada.gov/.

63 FIFA World Cup 2026, "Ticket Terms of Use for Matches held in the USA," October 15, 2025, https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/c3856874964e176/original/FIFA-World-Cup-2026-Ticketing-Terms-of-Use.pdf.

accessibility and companion tickets. McNicol said in an interview for this report: “What happens in an evacuation if your caretaker is 20 rows above? It just doesn’t work, and it’s a lot of money to spend to not have what you need.” Although FIFA has not produced disaggregated World Cup attendance numbers, FSE members reported seeing “whole rows of empty wheelchair bays” at major matches, suggesting that FIFA’s policies severely restricted participation from an already historically marginalized fanbase.

Discriminatory Visa Bans and Border Control Barriers



/Fans

For supporters who were able to overcome the financial barriers to secure tickets and obtain travel authorization to the World Cup, access to the games was still far from assured. The next challenge was entering the host countries, and visa requirements, travel restrictions, and administrative decisions created yet another layer of unequal access.

Although President Infantino said at the opening press conference that FIFA could not intervene in U.S. visa and immigration decisions, past World Cup host governments worked with the international federation to create tournament-specific mechanisms to facilitate the entry of international supporters.[64] At Russia 2018, international fans with World Cup tickets could obtain a free FAN ID,[65] which provided visa-free entry to Russia, and at Qatar 2022, international ticket holders could apply for a Hayya Card after purchasing their tickets, with FIFA describing the card as an entry permit to the country.[66]

64 Matt Hughes, “Gianni Infantino tells football fans to ‘chill’ in response to Fifa’s critics,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2026/jun/10/gianni-infantino-fifa-criticism-2026-world-cup.

65 FIFA, “Ticket sales for 2018 FIFA World Cup™ to start on 14 September 2017,” September 12, 2017, https://inside.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/2018russia/media-releases/ticket-sales-for-2018-fifa-world-cuptm-to-start-on-14-september-2017-2907645.

66 FIFA, “Apply for Tickets for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™,” FIFA, 2022, https://ipt.fifa.com/en/tournaments/mens/worldcup/qatar2022/news/apply-for-tickets-fwc22.

World Cup Visa Denials in Canada

For the Canadian leg of the tournament, June 2026 data from Canada's Immigration Department indicated that "there were more visas refused than granted among applications with the 'FIFA World Cup 26' flag."[67]

World Cup visa refusals in Canada, by the numbers:[68]

Ghana	**1,423**	Nigeria	**557**
Pakistan	**797**	Colombia	**461**
India	**687**		

By contrast, applicants from visa-exempt countries faced substantially fewer barriers. Among applications for FIFA-specific Canadian electronic travel authorizations (eTAs) from the top countries, Panama, Australia, Germany, Brazil, and England, only 54 of 1,613 applications were rejected, and 2,340 total eTAs were approved.[69] The disparity suggests that access to attend the tournament varied substantially depending on a supporter's country of origin.

The U.S. imposed severe travel restrictions on supporters from countries subject to its travel bans, a move which Amnesty International's Secretary General Agnès Callamard described as "discriminatory, racist, and downright cruel," and constituting "racial discrimination under international human rights law."[70] Thirty-nine countries, as well as those with travel documents from the Palestinian authorities, were subject to full or partial U.S. travel restrictions during the tournament, including four participating World Cup countries: Iran, Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal.[71] These restrictions meant that countries could qualify for football's biggest stage while their supporters were effectively prevented from attending.

67 Nicholas Keung, "FIFA World Cup Is Drawing Thousands of Visa Applications to Canada. Here Are the Countries with the Highest Refusals," *The Toronto Star*, June 12, 2026, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/fifa-world-cup-is-drawing-thousands-of-visa-applications-to-canada-here-are-the-countries-with-the-highest-refusals/article_ed71a232-6c45-4c00-8cb9-292acbcb4040.html.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Amnesty International, "USA: Trump's Travel Ban Will Harm People Seeking Safety," June 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/usa-trumps-travel-ban-will-harm-people-seeking-safety/.

71 White House, "Restricting and Limiting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the Security of the United States," December 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/12/restricting-and-limiting-the-entry-of-foreign-nationals-to-protect-the-security-of-the--united-states/.

Senegalese supporters, for example, were only able to obtain single-entry U.S. visas, prohibiting them from traveling between matches in different host countries. According to Senegal's Ministry of Sport, this obstacle led the country not to send a delegation of fans to the World Cup for the first time in its national team history.[72] Côte d'Ivoire's fan confederation planned to bring approximately 500 supporters to the tournament, but reported its members were denied visas because of the U.S. travel ban, which barred entry to the U.S. for both prospective immigrants and temporary visitors.[73] Julien Kouadio Adonis, president of Côte d'Ivoire's national supporters' organization, the Comité National de Soutien aux Éléphants (CNSE), described the restrictions as "a form of segregation that doesn't dare speak its name, but the proof is there…No European country has faced this kind of restriction. Why Africa?"[74]

Iranian Fans: Visa Denials at U.S. Embassies in Europe



Shortly before the tournament, the Iranian football international federation reportedly had its U.S. ticket allocation withheld by FIFA.[75] These challenges unfolded against the backdrop of an escalating war between the U.S., Israel, and Iran. Just weeks before the tournament, the U.S. and Israel launched attacks on Iran, killing senior Iranian officials and dramatically escalating tensions between Iran and the host country.

The Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) told *The Guardian* about the decision, "Depriving Iranian supporters of access to their lawful and official allocation of tickets is an action contrary to the spirit governing international competitions and the principle of equality among participating countries… This development raises serious questions about the interference of non-sporting and political considerations in the organization of the world's biggest football event."[76]

At the same time, Iranian fans seeking to independently attend their team's matches faced difficulties obtaining U.S. visas. One Iranian football fan and notable sports and human rights advocate, Sara*, had attended several past men's and women's World Cups and had purchased a 2026 match ticket, but was unable to travel to the tournament. When Sara attended her visa interview, she said: "The [Embassy employee] didn't look at any of the documents I brought. He just looked at my passport and said: 'Do you have another passport?' I said, 'No.' And then he said, 'We don't give visas to Iranians.'"[77]

As Sport & Rights Alliance Executive Director Andrea Florence noted: "If Sara could not secure a visa, it is safe to say that no other Iranian fan was able to travel to the U.S. to attend their team matches… FIFA should have expressed outrage and acted on behalf of these fans."

*Pseudonym provided for safety reasons.

72 Ciaran Fahey, "Trump travel ban leaves Senegal, Ivory Coast fans in limbo for World Cup," *Associated Press*, January 13, 2026, https://sports.yahoo.com/articles/trump-travel-ban-leaves-senegal-110553896.html.

73 Nadia Huraimi, "'A World Cup for them not us': Fans' anger at US travel bans and visa restrictions," *BBC News*, June 7, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx212p8r28eo.

74 Ibid.

75 Jonathan Wilson, "Iran Federation Says Ticket Allocation Has Been Pulled Days Before Start of World Cup," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2026/jun/09/iran-federation-says-ticket-allocation-has-been-pulled-days-before-start-of-world-cup.

76 Ibid.

77 Megan Clement, "'We don't give visas to Iranians': what it's like to be at war with World Cup co-hosts," *The Observer*, June 12, 2026, https://observer.co.uk/news/sport/article/we-dont-give-visas-to-iranians-what-its-like-to-be-at-war-with-world-cup-co-hosts.

Other supporters also encountered visa delays or outright denials. Iraqi fans reported difficulties scheduling and securing the required visa interviews;[78] 40 members of a Moroccan supporters' association were reportedly denied visas;[79] a Democratic Republic of Congo superfan, Michel Kuka Mboladinga (also known as "Lumumba Vea"), drew media attention for being denied entry to the U.S. after attending his national team's match in Mexico.[80] Even approved travel authorization proved unreliable. Members of Scotland's Tartan Army reported that their U.S. Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) status changed from "approved" to "travel not authorised" shortly before they were scheduled to depart for the tournament and after they had already made travel arrangements.[81]

/Players, match officials and other accredited participants

In recent World Cup history, host countries established effective and dedicated mechanisms to facilitate the entry of accredited participants and tournament personnel. In 2010, the South African government guaranteed "priority treatment" at ports of entry and waived the need for a separate event visa for all FIFA delegates, national teams, and other accredited persons.[82] In 2014, Brazil required visas to be issued to FIFA delegates, member-association employees, referees, national-team members, and accredited media, and allowed participation documentation to confer entry.[83] Although 2026 Men's World Cup participants – including players, team staff, and international federation officials – were officially exempt from U.S. travel restrictions (Section 4, IV), this exemption did not consistently translate into timely or reliable entry into host countries, and visa barriers impacted athletes and other team and tournament staff.[84]

78 Nadia Huraimi, "'A World Cup for them not us': Fans' anger at US travel bans and visa restrictions," *BBC News*, June 7, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx212p8r28eo.

79 Khadijah Tachfine, "At Least 40 Moroccan Fans Denied U.S. Visas for World Cup, Losing Thousands in Tickets and Hotel Bookings," Hespress English, June 5, 2026, https://en.hespress.com/139375-at-least-40-moroccan-fans-denied-us-visas-for-world-cup-losing-thousands-in-tickets-hotel-booking.html.

80 Vitalii Yalahuzian, "DR Congo Superfan Denied U.S. Visa as He Tried to Support Team at World Cup," *Reuters*, June 27, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/dr-congo-superfan-denied-us-visa-support-team-world-cup-2026-06-27/.

81 Eoin Morris, "Scotland Fan Details Frustrating World Cup Travel Experience after ESTA Status Changes," HITC, June 8, 2026, https://travel.yahoo.com/advice/safety/articles/scotland-fan-details-frustrating-world-183000310.html.

82 Malusi Gigaba, "Deputy Minister Malusi Gigaba Notes Press Briefing in Pretoria," Republic of South Africa, Department of Sport and Recreation, July 1, 2010, https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/deputy-minister-malusi-gigabas-notes-press-briefing-pretoria-01-jul-2010.

83 Passport Visas Express, "Visa for FIFA Accredited Personnel and Volunteers—VICOR-TE of FIFA Brazil World Cup," https://www.passportvisasexpress.com/visa_services/brazil/country_news/visa_for_fifa_accredited_personnel_and_volunteers_vicor_te_of_fifa_brazil_world_cup.

84 White House, "Restricting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats," June 4, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/restricting-the-entry-of--foreign-nationals-to-protect-the-united-states-from-foreign-terrorists-and-other-national-security-and-public-safety-threats/.

U.S. Denies Entry to FIFA Match Official Somali World Cup Referee



Omar Artan was set to become the first Somali official to referee at a FIFA World Cup finals tournament.[85] After reportedly being subjected to an 11-hour immigration interview, Artan was denied entry at Miami International Airport over "security vetting concerns," despite allegedly holding valid papers and a visa.[86] Artan was ultimately unable to participate in the tournament altogether. Coise Aden Abshir, a senior adviser to Somalia's Ministry of Youth and Sports and a former national team captain, said that "denying [Artan] entry to the US and preventing him from officiating scheduled matches harms not only him personally but also undermines football's commitment to fairness, merit, and the spirit of fair play."[87]

When the Uruguayan team's delayed flight from Mexico to the U.S. arrived, team members were reportedly stopped, searched, and questioned before being allowed to proceed.[88] At Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, Iraq's striker Aymen Hussein was allegedly detained and questioned for nearly seven hours, including an inspection of his phone, before being released.[89] Photographer Talal Salah, who was traveling with the Iraqi delegation and held tournament accreditation, was also reportedly detained for more than 10 hours and ultimately denied entry.[90] Woodensky Pierre, the only Haiti-based player selected for the Haitian team, missed the first seven days of training camp while awaiting a U.S. visa.[91] Haiti is another country subject to the Trump administration's visa ban.

85 ESPN News Services, "Somali Referee Omar Artan Denied Entry to United States Ahead of World Cup," *ESPN*, June 9, 2026, https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/49002985/somali-referee-world-cup-denied-entry-united-states.

86 *Le Monde* with AFP, "Somali Referee Is Dropped from World Cup after Turned Back at U.S. Border," June 9, 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/sports/article/2026/06/09/somali-referee-is-dropped-from-world-cup-after-turned-back-at-us-border_6754267_9.html.

87 Radio France Internationale, "Somali referee denied entry to US for World Cup: official," *RFI*, June 8, 2026, https://www.rfi.fr/en/sports/20260608-somali-referee-denied-entry-to-us-for-world-cup-official.

88 Global Sports Desk, "FIFA World Cup 2026: Uruguay Players Stopped for Sniffer Dog Luggage Checks," *MSN*, June 15, 2026, https://www.msn.com/en-in/sports/fifa_world_cup/fifa-world-cup-2026-uruguay-players-stopped-for-sniffer-dog-luggage-checks-manuel-ugarte-s-reaction-goes-viral/ar-AA25J3dq.

89 Chris Tye, "Iraq World Cup Striker Aymen Hussein Detained at O'Hare; Photographer Talal Salah Denied Entry," *CBS News Chicago*, June 8, 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/iraq-world-cup-aymen-hussein-detained-ohare-photographer-talal-salah-denied-entry/.

90 Reuters, "Iraq's Aymen Hussein Questioned at U.S. Entry as World Cup Travel Restrictions Tighten," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2026/jun/06/iraq-aymen-hussein-questioned-us-entry-world-cup.

91 Onz Chery, "Haitian Player Entry Delayed Ahead of World Cup," *Haitian Times*, May 28, 2026, https://haitiantimes.com/2026/05/28/haitian-player-entry-delayed/.

Unequal Playing Field: The Iranian Delegation's 2026 World Cup

The Iranian delegation experienced the most extensive set of obstacles documented in this report. Rather than encountering a single administrative barrier, the team faced restrictions before departure, at the border, and throughout the tournament.

U.S. visas were denied or delayed for a substantial portion of Iran's non-playing delegation, including managerial, executive, technical, and support staff.[92] Unable to establish a training base in the U.S. on the same conditions available to other teams, Iran set up its training base in Tijuana, Mexico, and had to cross the border for its three U.S. matches.[93] For two of those matches, the team had to enter and depart the U.S. on the same day.[94]

The arrangement subjected the Iranian delegation to repeated border processing throughout the tournament, with every U.S. match requiring the team to undergo entry procedures and face uncertainty over how long they would take and whether every member of the delegation would be admitted. The resulting disruption affected the conditions essential to elite competition: fixed training schedules, structured recovery, and the ability to arrive at matches rested and prepared. Staff members who would ordinarily support the team's preparation were absent because their visas had been denied, while travel that would ordinarily be routine consumed hours on match days. Rather than having the certainty and continuity afforded to other teams, Iran's ability to enter the United States was reassessed at every crossing.

The Iranian Football Association characterized the situation as "political interference in sport,"[95] with captain Mehdi Taremi describing the tournament as a "logistical disaster."[96] Coach Amir Ghalenoei added: "I urge Fifa: don't let hosts treat players and teams the same way in future World Cups."[97]

A pattern emerges across these accounts. In each instance, the visa exemption for accredited participants, a consistent feature of past World Cups, should have applied. Instead, the tournament-participant carve-out for border restrictions either did not operate or did so inconsistently. Notably, almost all of these instances occurred with people from the Global South, underscoring the discriminatory impacts of U.S. travel restrictions on World Cup participants. An international sporting event depends on more than simply ensuring that athletes can cross borders and take the field in time for kick-off. A meaningful and equal playing field requires that entire teams and their staff can attend, travel between matches with reasonable predictability, rest and recover, and focus on competing – while fans are able to be present to support and cheer for them. At this tournament, those basic conditions of attendance and participation were not consistently guaranteed.

92 Agence France-Presse, "'We are upset': Iran Players Hit Out at US Visa Delay after World Cup Arrival in Mexico," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2026/jun/07/iran-players-us-visa-delays-world-cup-2026-mexico.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 BBC Sport, "We have been treated unfairly by USA - Iran," *BBC*, June 27, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cze98ywdwlgo.

97 Ibid.

V. External Accountability and Civil Protections



FIFA has a responsibility to conduct human rights due diligence prior to its events. Human rights risks including those related to press freedom, accessibility, right to protest, immigration enforcement operations and safeguarding had been identified as part of the United 2026 consultation process as early as 2018.

Press Freedom and Accessibility

Ensuring that journalists from diverse backgrounds can access and cover the World Cup is a fundamental component of FIFA's press freedom responsibility. A tournament of this global scale should enable journalists from different countries, communities, and lived experiences to report from the ground, apply scrutiny, and share their distinct perspectives and findings with audiences around the world. Their presence helps ensure that the World Cup, and FIFA itself, are not seen and understood through a narrow set of voices, but with the diversity of the people, cultures, and experiences that are impacted by the global game.

FIFA's media accreditation processes were not sufficient to provide journalists with reliable access to the 2026 Men's World Cup. Visa denials, single-entry visas, and heightened suspicion at the border transformed what should have been routine travel between the host countries into an operational barrier, disproportionately impacting journalists from countries subject to U.S. immigration restrictions.

Journalists from Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo were reportedly denied visas for both the U.S. and Canada.[98] "We are journalists. We are not supporters; we are there to do our jobs," said Abdoulaye Thiam, president of Senegal's national sports press association and AIPS Africa, emphasizing the expectation that journalists be able to follow their national team and cover the tournament across the three host countries.[99] Similarly, all 20 Iranian reporters who held FIFA-approved accreditation were unable to secure travel authorization to enter the U.S.[100] These denials effectively excluded national teams' and football supporters' reporting corps from covering the tournament.

Some journalists who did receive travel authorization reported instances of discrimination and racist treatment at the U.S. border. Brazilian journalist Karine Alves of TV Globo recalled being pulled out of the regular immigration line, treated harshly by U.S. border agents, and subjected to what she characterized as discriminatory and intimidating treatment.[101] The Brazilian National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ) subsequently cited Alves's experience as part of a broader pattern of "embarrassment, restrictions on circulation and difficulties" facing journalists covering the World Cup in the U.S.[102]

98 Agence de Presse Sénégalaise, "Mondial 2026: L'AIPS Juge Inacceptable la Difficulté des Journalistes Accrédités à Obtenir un Visa Américain," June 6, 2026, https://aps.sn/mondial-2026-laips-juge-inacceptable-la-difficulte-des-journalistes-accredites-a-obtenir-un-visa-americain/.

99 Alexandre Lemarié and Denis Ménétrier, "Coupe du Monde 2026: Détenteurs de Visa à une Seule Entrée, les Journalistes Sénégalais Confinés aux États-Unis," *Le Monde*, June 16, 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/sport/article/2026/06/16/coupe-du-monde-2026-detenteurs-de-visa-a-une-seule-entree-les-journalistes-senegalais-confines-aux-etats-unis_6703550_3242.html.

100 Megan Cattel and Kourosh Ziabari, "Shut Out: For the First Time, Iranian Journalists are Denied Entry to Cover a FIFA World Cup," Nieman Reports, July 7, 2026, https://niemanreports.org/iranian-journalists-world-cup-banned-visas-sports-fifa-iran-trump-immigration-ban/.

101 Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas (FENAJ), "FENAJ Exige Medidas contra Constrangimentos e Restrições ao Trabalho Jornalístico na Copa do Mundo," June 11, 2026, https://fenaj.org.br/fenaj-exige-medidas-contra-constrangimentos-e-restricoes-ao-trabalho-jornalistico-na-copa-do-mundo/.

102 Ibid.

When the International Sports Press Association (AIPS) formally complained to FIFA that journalists faced "unacceptable" access barriers with only a few days from kick-off, FIFA responded that visa issuance was a matter of national sovereignty.103 Of course, FIFA could not control every decision by host-country authorities regarding the international press. But the international federation could control how transparent its own systems were, how clearly it communicated its obligations, and how it monitored their implementation.

FIFA did not publish its criteria for granting or refusing media accreditation, the total number of accreditations available, or the process for appealing a refusal. Laura Strawmyer, U.S. Advocacy Representative at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), told the Sport & Rights Alliance, "In the months leading up to the tournament, FIFA gave vastly different estimates on the number of press accreditations, at one point saying it might be 50,000 journalists, at one point 16,000."

The transparency issues regarding journalists' rights extended into the event itself. FIFA declined to establish a regular schedule of press conferences during the tournament. When asked whether it would follow the International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s practice of holding regular briefings with President Infantino, FIFA instead pointed to a media mailbox and claimed invitations to press conferences would be posted through its Media Hub.[104] President Infantino ultimately held only one press conference on behalf of the international federation, occurring before kick-off in June.[105]

As a multi-billion dollar entity that organizes the largest events in the world, FIFA should welcome robust, diverse and transparent avenues for public accountability. The FIFA President's lack of regular, open interactions with the media, coupled with the organization's failure to ensure access and safety for journalists, is highly concerning and – in areas where FIFA had the power and ability to anticipate and address predictable risks – falls short of meeting its human rights obligations.

103 Gianni Merlo, "Statement on World Cup Journalist Visa Restrictions," Association Internationale de la Presse Sportive (AIPS) media, 2026, https://www.aipsmedia.com/aips/pages/articles/2026/37956.html.

104 Nick Harris, "FIFA World Cup 2026 in Trump's America: Nothing Can Be Ruled Out," Play the Game, March 30, 2026, https://www.playthegame.org/news/fifa-world-cup-2026-in-trump-s-america-nothing-can-be-ruled-out.

105 FIFA, "President Opening FIFA World Cup Match Moment of Joy and Celebration," June 10, 2026, https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/president/news/president-opening-fifa-world-cup-match-moment-joy-celebration.

Rights to Protest and Peaceful Assembly

The same distinction between FIFA's human rights obligations and host countries' practices applies to the right to protest around World Cup stadiums. FIFA was not responsible for policing demonstrations in host cities, and local governments retained responsibility for public order, but it is part of FIFA's role to anticipate the human rights risks associated with protests surrounding the tournament, establish expectations for host country authorities, and monitor whether those expectations are being met. Given the violent deployment of federal officials for protests in various U.S. cities,[106] human rights organizations' pre-tournament concerns regarding the right to free and public protests,[107] and FIFA's own human rights due-diligence process for the 2026 bid to identify salient risks across stadiums, cities, airports, borders, and public spaces,[108] the international sports federation had ample warning of these issues. FIFA reported to the Sport & Rights Alliance that its Safety and Security team worked extensively with Mexican public safety authorities to push for human rights-respecting crowd control practices.

Major sporting events create an unusual concentration of public attention and can provide communities with an opportunity to draw international scrutiny to longstanding grievances. In Mexico, social movements used the tournament's opening day to bring issues, including the country's crisis of disappearances[109] and the effects of World Cup-related development and spending,[110] to the attention of a global audience. On June 11, thousands of people participated in demonstrations across Mexico City, resulting in confrontations with the police, the deployment of tear gas, and the detention of at least two journalists. UN experts expressed concern over these reports, stating that "international sporting events should never come at the expense of civic space or the rights of victims."[111]

On June 30, more than a million people gathered around the Angel of Independence in Mexico City following Mexico's victory over Ecuador. Four people died during the ensuing celebrations, three reportedly from suffocation, according to Mexican health authorities.[112]

106 Human Rights Watch, "United States: Federal Agents Use Excessive Force in Illinois," October 23, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/23/united-states-federal-agents-use-excessive-force-in-illinois.

107 Amnesty International, "Mexico: Women searchers planning World Cup protest over disappeared loved ones must be protected and heard," June 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/06/mexico-women-searchers-planning-world-cup-protest-over-disappeared--loved-ones-must-be-protected-and-heard/.

108 Associated Press, "FIFA to evaluate risk of violence if Mexico co-hosts 2026 World Cup," *ESPN*, April 9, 2018, https://www.espn.com.sg/soccer/story/_/id/37550443/fifa-evaluate-risk-violence-mexico-co-hosts-2026-world-cup.

109 Juanita Goebertus Estrada, "The Stadium of the Disappeared: World Cup Should Kick Off Justice for Families," Human Rights Watch, April 22, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/22/the-stadium-of-the-disappeared.

110 Jorge Alfonso, "Mexico World Cup Puts Spotlight on Protest Movements," Latin America Reports, June 12, 2026, https://www.latinamericareports.com/mexico-world-cup-puts-spotlight-on-protest-movements/14668/.

111 UN Special Procedures, "FIFA World Cup: Families of disappeared persons must be able to speak out and demonstrate freely, say UN experts," OHCHR, July 18, 2026, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/07/fifa-world-cup-families-disappeared-persons-must-be-able--speak-out-and.

112 Ali Watkins, "4 People Die During World Cup Celebrations in Mexico City," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/01/world/americas/world-cup-mexico-city-crowd-deaths.html.

Immigration Enforcement Presence

Following immigration enforcement incidents occurring at the 2025 Club World Cup and ICE's increasing activity in the U.S. at large, international and domestic fans expressed significant concern over whether the federal agency would play a central role in the 2026 World Cup.[113] FIFA should have provided clear, public information about the presence and role of federal immigration personnel at stadiums, fan zones, and other official World Cup sites. Instead, confusion persisted about whether participation in World Cup activities could expose fans to abusive immigration enforcement.

In May 2026, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio allegedly stated that ICE would not be present inside World Cup stadiums.[114] However, Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin later asserted that ICE personnel would be deployed at venues.[115] The U.S. government's conflicting messaging around immigration enforcement contributed to a climate of uncertainty and fear. A "No ICE in the Cup" campaign organized local "ICE-free" watch parties in anticipation of ICE presence at games,[116] and 21 U.S.-based soccer supporter groups endorsed the ACLU's travel advisory against the U.S. leg of the tournament.[117] In a letter to FIFA, the AFL-CIO called on leadership to keep ICE out of World Cup host cities and pushed back on FIFA's plans to open its worker records to the Trump administration's FBI background check database.[118]

Although reporting of ICE activity inside World Cup venues was limited, ICE intensified its detention and deportation efforts throughout the months of the tournament, arresting approximately 10,000 people over five days in late June.[119] "As the world was captivated by the knockout stages, the U.S. government conducted a terrifying surge in militarized immigration enforcement far away from stadium lights that impacted tens of thousands of our neighbors," said Daniel Noroña, Americas Advocacy Director, Amnesty International USA.[120]

Ensuring that fans can attend the World Cup safely and without fear of harassment, detention, or arbitrary removal is part of FIFA's responsibility as the tournament organizer. Where credible concerns caused fans to fear travelling to or participating in the tournament, FIFA had a responsibility to address those concerns transparently, communicate the risks clearly, and take reasonable measures to ensure that the World Cup was genuinely accessible and safe for all.

113 Human Rights Watch, "US: ICE Arrest at FIFA Event Spotlights Dangers for World Cup," December 3, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/03/us-ice-arrest-at-fifa-event-spotlights-dangers-for-world-cup.

114 Impact Policies, "Trump Immigration Policy Turns World Cup Celebration into Deportation Nightmare," June 18, 2026, https://impactpolicies.org/news/966/trump-immigration-policy-turns-world-cup-celebration-into-deportation-nightmare.

115 Ibid.

116 No ICE in the Cup, "No ICE in the Cup," https://www.noiceinthecup.us/.

117 Jamil Dakwar, "Over 120 Civil Society Groups Issue Travel Advisory for U.S. Ahead of FIFA World Cup," American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), April 23, 2026, https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/over-120-civil-society-groups-issue-travel-advisory-for-u-s-ahead-of-fifa-world-cup.

118 AFL-CIO, "AFL-CIO Demands FIFA Protect Workers, Keep ICE Out of host Cities", May 11, 2026, https://aflcio.org/press/releases/afl-cio--demands-fifa-protect-workers-keep-ice-out-host-cities.

119 Hamed Aleaziz, "ICE Immigrant Arrests Surge, with Approximately 10,000 Arrested over Five Days," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/01/us/politics/ice-immigrant-arrests-surge.html.

120 Sport & Rights Alliance, "FIFA: A World Cup Without the World: Assessing Human Rights Impacts of the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup," July 16, 2026, https://sportandrightsalliance.org/fifa-a-world-cup-without-the-world/.

Survivors' Voices: The Participation of Players Facing Sexual Assault Allegations

The 2026 Men's World Cup also underscored a critical debate about FIFA's decision-making and transparency regarding players facing ongoing criminal trials or allegations of sexual violence. FIFA's failure to run background checks during players' accreditation processes resulted in the participation of at least eight players facing pending sexual-assault cases or allegations of sexual violence.[121] Although FIFA's in-competition policy explicitly requires athletes to disclose whether they have been investigated for or convicted of a sexual or other violent offence, with failure to disclose potentially resulting in the removal of accreditation, the organization did not provide any information on whether these disclosures were made, or how they were assessed or acted upon.[122] With no clear public framework explaining how FIFA evaluated serious allegations or criminal proceedings, questions about player eligibility became the subject of extensive discourse in media coverage and on social media. The lack of information on how these declarations were handled not only increased institutional distrust, but raises serious questions about the legitimacy of FIFA's commitment to safeguarding and the quality of the accreditation process for players, coaches, referees, and others.

The Sport & Rights Alliance's 2025 report "No One Wants to Talk About It" in partnership with Thomas More University provides a useful framework on how to address the absence of consistent standards governing how sports organizations respond to athletes convicted of sexual offenses.[123] Led by survivors' voices, the report emphasizes a profound disconnect between the stated values of sport and institutional actions, calling for transparent, trauma-informed, and survivor-centered decision-making in the creation and implementation of eligibility standards. At the 2026 World Cup, FIFA lacked clear public communication explaining what information would be considered, who would make the decision, and what standard would apply – leading to the re-traumatization of many survivors of gender-based violence worldwide. The contrast with other areas of sport regulation is notable. FIFA has detailed, binding rules governing doping and match-fixing, including procedures for investigation, adjudication, and sanction. Sexual violence and other forms of personal misconduct have not received the same degree of standardized treatment.[124] Instead, responsibility shifts among clubs, national federations, national courts, and international governing bodies, while no single institution is clearly accountable for determining whether participation in a major sporting event is consistent with safeguarding obligations.

An effective human rights framework would require the organization to establish in advance how allegations and convictions will be assessed, who will make those decisions, what information will be considered, and what safeguards will be put in place. While FIFA should not prejudge criminal proceedings or disregard due process, the organization must move away from case-by-case discretion and implement a predictable and transparent system of protection and accountability.

121 Margaret Fleming, "Rape Cases Hang over World Cup Knockout Sontage," *MSN*, June 30, 2026, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/rape-cases-hang-over-world-cup-knockout-stage/ar-AA26Ubyx.

122 FIFA, *Safeguarding and Anti-Discrimination Code of Conduct*, revised November 2025, https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/75614c016c207347/original/Safeguarding-and-Anti-Discrimination-Code-of-Conduct.pdf.

123 Sport & Rights Alliance, Athletes Network for Safer Sports and Thomas More University of Applied Sciences, "No One Wants to Talk About It," October 7, 2025, https://sportandrightsalliance.org/new-report-no-one-wants-to-talk-about-it/.

124 Ibid.

VI. Governance and Remedy



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Where FIFA had the sole discretion to enforce its own standards, uphold principles of good governance, and establish human rights and safeguarding mechanisms at the 2026 Men's World Cup, it repeatedly fell short of its human rights responsibilities.

Lack of Access to Grievance Mechanisms

As part of its Human Rights Policy,[125] FIFA has a responsibility to provide remedy for abuses to which it has contributed – and that includes ensuring access to a transparent and independent grievance mechanism for everyone participating in or working at the tournament, including fans, athletes, journalists, and stadium staff. Yet FIFA's formal commitment did not translate into an effective safeguarding practice that participants and spectators could see, access, or rely on. Football Supporters Europe's (FSE) Executive Director Ronan Evain noted that information about FIFA's grievance mechanism was not adequately displayed at the matches on stadium billboards or large screens, in toilets, or at food and beverage areas. "Once inside the stadium, there was close to nothing," Evain said. "So, if something happens to you, you have no way of finding information about the grievance mechanism." Amnesty International representatives informed the Sport & Rights Alliance that World Cup stadium staff similarly reported not knowing of the grievance mechanism's existence, nor that they could report human rights violations directly to FIFA. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) shared that FIFA similarly did not communicate how its grievance mechanism would function to press members, who were responsible for responding to complaints, or how an outside press-freedom organization could engage with it on behalf of journalists. When Human Rights Watch called for greater clarity about how safeguards for journalists would operate throughout the tournament, FIFA did not provide further information.[126] As CPJ's Laura Strawmeyer explained, "we just didn't know a lot of the details about how [these systems] would really work."

While FIFA appointed a Safeguarding and Anti-Discrimination Venue Manager at each of the 16 venues for the first time in World Cup history, FIFA's messaging was unclear about how these managers were connected to on-site grievances, or what their role was in increasing the accessibility of the grievance mechanism.[127] These venue managers were reportedly responsible for protection, anti-discrimination, and inclusion measures from the time stadium gates opened until spectators returned home safely, with one manager describing their duty to "monitor what's happening in the stands and immediately deal with any incident such as harassment, inappropriate behaviour or racist comments that are reported."[128]

Other major sporting events indicate that FIFA could have made these grievance mechanisms and their accompanying processes more accessible. In an interview for this report, Coordinator for the SRA Athletes Network for Safer Sports, Joanna Maranhão, pointed to the UEFA EURO 2024 and 2025's visible and accessible rapid response mechanisms, including posted QR codes directing

125 FIFA, *FIFA Human Rights Policy*, 2017, https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/FIFAs_Human_Rights_Policy_0.pdf.

126 Human Rights Watch, "World Cup 2026: FIFA Needs to Act on Human Rights," December 3, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/03/world-cup-2026-fifa-needs-to-act-on-human-rights.

127 FIFA, "Safeguarding and Anti-Discrimination Venue Manager: Rodrigo Quintanilla," June 29, 2026, https://inside.fifa.com/human-rights/fifa-guardians/news/safeguarding-anti-discrimation-venue-manager-rodrigo-quintanilla.

128 Ibid.

spectators to immediate support services and private spaces staffed by trained professionals.[129] The comparison demonstrates that FIFA could have made its mechanisms substantially more effective without requiring a new model of stadium safety. FSE's Martin Endemann similarly noted that information could have been displayed more prominently throughout stadiums, in addition to toilets and food-service areas, where spectators were likely to see it.

President Trump and Infantino

The importance of clear and transparent rules extends to FIFA's internal decision-making and independence from political influence. Yet, during the 2026 tournament, FIFA President Gianni Infantino's close relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump raised questions about the organization's susceptibility to external interference.[130] In December 2025, Infantino awarded President Trump the inaugural FIFA Peace Prize, despite FIFA providing little public information about the award's selection criteria or process.[131] In 2025, Human Rights Watch's Minky Worden wrote to Infantino to request information about the prize, including to question why there were no nominees, no criteria, no judges, and no transparent process, and received no response.[132] Additionally, FairSquare filed an ethics complaint alleging that Infantino's conduct violated FIFA's political-neutrality requirements.[133]

While it may not be unusual for the FIFA President and leader of a state hosting the World Cup to have a close relationship, an incident involving a suspended red card against the U.S. national team demonstrated how quickly the appearance of political influence can undermine confidence in FIFA's decision-making and governance.[134]

129 Kalika Mehta, "Euro 2024 Gets Human Rights Complaints Mechanism," *Deutsche Welle*, July 2, 2026, https://www.dw.com/en/euro-2024-gets-human-rights-complaints-mechanism/a-69500948.

130 Paul MacInnes, "FIFA's Gianni Infantino Defends Relationship with Donald Trump," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/feb/28/fifa-gianni-infantino-defends-relationship-donald-trump-world-cup-2026.

131 FIFA, "President Trump Receives Inaugural FIFA Peace Prize," December 5, 2025, https://inside.fifa.com/campaigns/football-unites-the-world/news/president-trump-peace-prize-football-unites-the-world.

132 Minky Worden, "Letter to FIFA President Gianni Infantino Regarding FIFA's Peace Prize," Human Rights Watch, November 11, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2025/12/FIFA%20Peace%20Prize%20letter%20from%20Human%20Rights%20Watch%20.pdf.

133 FairSquare, "FairSquare Files IOC Complaint against Infantino," July 14, 2026, https://fairsq.org/fairsquare-files-ioc-complaint-against-infantino/.

134 FIFA, "'Incredible honour': Gianni Infantino thanks President Donald Trump for show of support," January 20, 2025, https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/president/news/donald-trump-rally-gianni-infantino-world-cup-2026-mentioned.

Balogun's Red Card: "The Integrity of the Game is at Stake"



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After U.S. striker Folarin Balogun received a red card for in-game conduct, President Trump publicly criticized the decision, personally asking FIFA to review it, while U.S. Soccer raised the possibility of taking the case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).[135] Infantino confirmed he received Trump's call and told him that the matter was before FIFA's independent judicial bodies. Shortly after, FIFA suspended the one-match ban, allowing Balogun to play in the United States' next match.[136] President Trump subsequently thanked FIFA for "doing what was right."[137]

FIFA maintained that Mohammad al-Kamali, chairman of the disciplinary committee, made the suspension decision,[138] and President Trump himself said that Infantino had not made the final determination.[139] But the episode undercut public trust in the integrity of the game: the president of a host country publicly intervened in a disciplinary matter involving the host nation's player, FIFA's president acknowledged the intervention, and the player's suspension was lifted.

UEFA characterized FIFA's decision as crossing a "red line," warning that "when the certainty of rules is no longer guaranteed by their guardians, the integrity of the game is at stake, and the credibility of a competition is undermined."[140]

135 Ronald Blum and Michelle Price, "Trump Asks FIFA to Review Folarin Balogun Suspension," Associated Press, July 6, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/falorin-balogun-suspension-world-cup-e5a5cab5731a916808601be93cb36832.

136 Ibid.

137 Joe Rivera, "Donald Trump Thanks FIFA for Reversing Balogun Suspension," *USA Today*, July 5, 2026, https://sports.yahoo.com/articles/donald-trump-thanks-fifa-reversing-172627833.html.

138 Martyn Ziegler, "Only one official involved in decision to waive Folarin Balogun ban," *The Times*, July 12, 2026, https://www.thetimes.com/sport/football/world-cup/article/folarin-balogun-ban-world-cup-usa-25z8bfjg3.

139 Joe Rivera, 2026.

140 Adriana Garcia, "UEFA, FIFA and Folarin Balogun Red Card Ban Overturned for USMNT," *ESPN*, July 6, 2026, https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/49284889/uefa-fifa-folarin-balogun-red-card-ban-overturned-usmnt.

The Secret Plan to Sell the Game

In July 2026, FIFA President Gianni Infantino's proposed FIFA Forward Enterprise (FFE) revealed another dimension of FIFA's governance crisis. The "project of one person,"[141] was developed without meaningful public transparency or consultation with FIFA's member associations, contemplating selling stakes in the commercial rights to the World Cup and other FIFA competitions to private investors.[142] The proposal was ultimately withdrawn following widespread opposition, but the episode raised fundamental questions about who controls the future of the world's most popular sporting event, and whose interests FIFA is accountable to.

As the Sport & Rights Alliance stated in August, "The person who leads FIFA matters a great deal, but the bigger problem is systemic…this crisis must spur long-overdue reforms."[143] The FFE episode highlighted the need for FIFA to address the underlying governance structures that allowed such a proposal to advance with so little public scrutiny, and ensure that commercial decisions are subject to the same principles of transparency, accountability and human rights that FIFA has publicly committed to uphold.



141 Dan Sheldon, "Kevin Lamour, key FIFA official who criticised Infantino's World Cup plans, leaves role," *The Athletic*, Aug. 17, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7519542/2026/08/17/kevin-lamour-fifa-exit/.

142 FIFA, "FIFA intends to expand football development funding to over USD 10 billion subject to approval by FIFA Member Associations," July 28, 2026, https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/media-releases/intends-expand-football-development-funding-usd-10-billion-subject-approval-member-associations.

143 Sport & Rights Alliance, "FIFA: Governance Crisis Reveals Urgent Need for Rights Reform," August 6, 2026, https://sportandrightsalliance.org/fifa-governance-crisis-reveals-urgent-need-for-rights-reform/.

VII. Conclusion



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The 2026 Men's World Cup demonstrated that FIFA's human rights commitments are only as meaningful as the leadership, systems and organizational culture that uphold them. Across issues ranging from immigration and journalist access to accessibility, safeguarding, and fan safety, the tournament exposed a recurring gap between policies on paper and protections in practice. Rather than setting a new standard for human rights in sport, the 2026 Men's World Cup showed how far FIFA still has to go to truly uphold its responsibilities on human rights.

Some of the most serious human rights challenges documented in this report originated with host governments rather than FIFA. FIFA does not issue visas, control national borders, or police public demonstrations. But under the UN Guiding Principles, and as stated in FIFA's own Human Rights Policy, FIFA should "exercise its leverage, and seek to increase said leverage where necessary, in connection with adverse human rights impacts arising through its business relationships."[144] Yet when foreseeable risks emerged, FIFA too often deferred to national sovereignty rather than using the tools available to it to prevent, mitigate, or respond to their impact on the tournament.

Other failures were more directly within FIFA's control. Supporters with disabilities faced ticketing policies that made attendance prohibitively expensive or practically unworkable. Journalists lacked transparency about accreditation and avenues for appeal. Half of the world was effectively prevented from entering the main host country. Fans, stadium workers, and media members struggled to identify or access the grievance mechanisms FIFA had established to protect them. And FIFA lacked a transparent accreditation process and background checks involving participating athletes.

The lesson of 2026 is not that international sporting bodies can guarantee the conduct of sovereign governments; they cannot. It is that human rights risks must shape how tournaments are awarded, planned, contracted, monitored, and delivered, and that governing bodies must build robust, transparent and accountable human rights systems, and be prepared to act, especially when circumstances change.

FIFA now approaches its 2027 presidential election with an opportunity to decide what comes next. The international federation has already taken the important step of recognizing human rights as part of its institutional responsibilities. Its next president should ensure that those responsibilities become a meaningful part of how FIFA exercises its enormous power: through enforceable hosting requirements, transparent decision-making, accessible safeguards, independent external oversight, and a willingness to use FIFA's leverage when the rights of the people who make the World Cup possible are at risk. Only then can FIFA credibly promise a World Cup that places people before profit.

144 FIFA, *FIFA Human Rights Policy*, 2017, https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/FIFAs_Human_Rights_Policy_0.pdf.

VIII. Recommendations to FIFA



The shortcomings documented during the 2026 Men's World Cup come at a critical moment for FIFA. The international federation is confronting a governance crisis that has raised serious concerns about transparency, accountability, independent oversight, and the concentration of power within the organization. Addressing the human rights failures identified in this report requires much more than changes to tournament operations; it requires systemic governance reform that embeds human rights and good governance into FIFA's leadership and decision-making structures, provides an independent system of checks and balances, and ensures meaningful accountability when its commitments are not met.

The following recommendations identify priority reforms for FIFA including the 2027 Women's World Cup in Brazil, the 2030 Men's World Cup in Spain, Morocco and Portugal, the 2034 Men's World Cup in Saudi Arabia. These recommendations are also relevant to other institutions responsible for delivering international sporting events, including the International Olympic Committee and the upcoming 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games in Los Angeles.

Make human rights requirements binding, and set enforceable conditions for hosting future Men's and Women's World Cups

FIFA should fundamentally reform how human rights obligations are incorporated into the selection and oversight of World Cup hosts. Human rights requirements should be specific, binding, and enforceable conditions of hosting, backed by independent monitoring, public reporting, and predetermined consequences for non-compliance, including for the upcoming 2030 and 2034 Men's World Cups. FIFA must support these human rights expectations for hosts with adequate resources and funding for their substantive implementation.

Consistent with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, FIFA should use and, where necessary, increase its leverage when a host fails to meet its human rights obligations.[145] Host country agreements should establish escalating measures for serious or persistent violations, including corrective action, financial and contractual consequences, and, as a last resort, responsible disengagement when harms cannot otherwise be prevented or mitigated.

FIFA cannot treat its human rights responsibilities as fulfilled simply because implementation has been delegated to a host government. The possibility that a host may fail to uphold its commitments must be built into FIFA's human rights framework from the outset, with clear consequences when it does.

145 United Nations, *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework*, 2011, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/720245.

Ensure equal tournament access for fans with disabilities

FIFA should establish binding accessibility standards developed in meaningful consultation with supporters with disabilities and disability-rights organizations. Accessible tickets should be available across the same price categories as other tickets, with companion or personal-assistant seats provided without additional charge. FIFA and host cities should publish comprehensive accessibility information before tickets go on sale and establish an accessible, widely-advertised mechanism for reporting and remedying failures before and during the tournament.

Guarantee meaningful, equal access to future tournaments for athletes, journalists, and other accredited participants

FIFA should require host governments to establish reliable, expedited visa and entry procedures for accredited participants, without discrimination according to race, gender, religion, political opinion, nationality, or other status These should include timely processing, meaningful review of denials, multiple-entry visas where tournaments span countries, appropriate safeguards at ports of entry, and mechanisms through which FIFA can intervene in urgent cases.

For journalists, FIFA should also publish clear accreditation criteria, capacity limits, grounds for denial, and avenues for appeal, and establish minimum standards for freedom of movement and the ability to safely perform their work. Accreditation should not be treated as meaningful access when a journalist cannot obtain a visa, enter the host country, or move between tournament locations.

Protect LGBTI+ fans, local communities and ensure equal participation for all athletes

FIFA should ensure that LGBTI+ fans, athletes, and local communities can safely and equally participate in its tournaments, including by requiring host countries and cities to identify and mitigate risks of discrimination, harassment, and violence beyond the stadiums, including at host country border entry. FIFA should also ensure that eligibility rules do not discriminate against transgender and intersex athletes, including through harmful sex testing and other requirements that exclude athletes based on sex characteristics, gender identity, or gender expression.

Establish clear eligibility and safeguarding standards for athletes

FIFA should establish a binding, transparent framework governing the participation of athletes facing serious allegations, pending criminal proceedings, or convictions involving sexual violence or other serious misconduct. The framework should distinguish among allegations, pending proceedings, and findings; identify who makes eligibility decisions and under what standard; preserve due-process rights; communicate transparently to the public, and establish appropriate protections for survivors and other affected participants.

Decisions should be informed by survivors' voices and independent safeguarding and survivor-support expertise. The purpose is not to prejudge criminal proceedings, but to replace case-by-case discretion with a credible, consistent, and survivor-centered system for assessing safeguarding risks.

Ensure the protection of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, press freedom, and journalist safety

FIFA should require host governments to develop and publish human rights protocols governing tournament-related demonstrations and public gatherings, including protections for peaceful assembly, limits on the use of force, and specific protections for journalists. FIFA should independently monitor high-risk events and require investigation and remedy for credible allegations of arbitrary detention, excessive force, or interference with journalists. It should also reinstate regular, robust and transparent avenues for public accountability, including regular press conferences with FIFA leadership and meaningful engagement with a diverse, global community of journalists.

Make FIFA's grievance and remedy mechanisms visible and accessible

FIFA should comprehensively reform its independent human rights and safeguarding grievance mechanism for fans, athletes, journalists, workers, and affected communities. Information about the mechanism should be prominently displayed at stadiums and other official tournament spaces and should provide confidential reporting, trained personnel, clear response timelines, protection against retaliation, and effective avenues for remedy. FIFA should publicly report aggregate information about complaints and their resolution. FIFA should also set up a Remedy Fund for people impacted by its operations and all future tournaments.

Reform FIFA's leadership and organizational structures to guarantee accountability for human rights and good governance

FIFA should reform governance structures that have so far failed to protect its judicial, disciplinary, safeguarding, and human rights functions from both political interference and undue concentration or abuse of power within the organisation. FIFA should re-establish a permanent, independent Human Rights Advisory Board, composed of a diverse group of esteemed human rights and good governance experts, to hold FIFA's leadership and the FIFA Council accountable for how they integrate human rights into their decision-making; comprehensively reform the FIFA Ethics Committee by establishing an independent, transparent, external and accountable ethics system, with transparent appointments of experts with meaningful human rights and good governance backgrounds; and trauma-informed procedures for receiving, investigating, and adjudicating complaints; adopt a dedicated and time-bound Human Rights Strategy, that provides an organizational roadmap for human rights and good governance with meaningful and ongoing engagement with potentially affected stakeholders; and re-instate regular, robust and transparent avenues for public accountability, including regular press conferences with FIFA leadership and meaningful engagement with a diverse, global community of journalists.

List of Abbreviations

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
AIPS	International Sports Press Association (Association Internationale de la Presse Sportive)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAS	Court of Arbitration for Sport
CNSE	Comité National de Soutien des Éléphants
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
eTA	Electronic Travel Authorization
ESTA	Electronic System for Travel Authorization
FENAJ	Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas (Brazil)
FFIRI	Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
FSE	Football Supporters Europe
FWC26	FIFA World Cup 26
HRAB	Human Rights Advisory Board
HRAP	Human Rights Action Plan
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ILGA World	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LA28	Los Angeles 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Game
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex
NBC	National Broadcasting Company (U.S.)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
QR core	Quick Response code
RSF	Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières)
SRA	Sport & Rights Alliance
U.K.	United Kingdom
U.S.	United States
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations
UN	United Nations
UNPGs	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
USD	United States Dollar
VWP	Visa Waiver Program
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

Appendix I

Sport & Rights Alliance Letter to FIFA, September 29, 2026

SPORT & RIGHTS ALLIANCE

RAISING THE BAR FOR SPORT, HUMAN RIGHTS AND TRANSPARENCY

Amsterdam, Netherlands, 29 September 2026

Mattias Grafström,
Secretary General

Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)

FIFA-Strasse 20,
8044 Zürich
Switzerland

Re: Upcoming report on the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup

Dear Mr. Grafström,

We write on behalf of the Sport & Rights Alliance (SRA) regarding our upcoming report, titled "Profit Over People: The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup" (see advanced copy attached). As a global coalition of leading civil society organizations, the Sport & Rights Alliance works to promote the rights of everyone affected by sport, including athletes, fans, activists, journalists, workers, women, children, survivors of abuse and LGBTI+ people.

This year's tournament was a World Cup of firsts – the first to host 48 teams, the first to take place in three countries, and the first to formally embed international human rights standards throughout the full lifecycle, from bidding and awarding to preparing and hosting. In line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the FIFA Statutes, and its Human Rights Policy, FIFA has a responsibility to respect human rights and ensure access to remedy for adverse impacts linked to its operations.

Our report evaluates the human rights impacts associated with the delivery of the 2026 Men's World Cup across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Our analysis identifies a fundamental gap between FIFA's human rights responsibilities and their substantive implementation. **Ahead of publication, we kindly request your formal response to these findings and consideration of the recommendations enclosed.**

The report finds that FIFA relied heavily on host governments and local authorities to fulfill the federation's human rights responsibilities, without implementing sufficiently clear guidelines, financial support, oversight, or consequences for non-compliance. This approach ultimately failed when pressure-tested by the unfavorable human rights environments in the host countries, most notably in the United States – which hosted the vast majority of matches, including the semi-final and final.

Our analysis details how excessive pricing and ticketing structures created severe financial and physical barriers for supporters and fans with disabilities. Furthermore, it documents discriminatory visa refusals, travel bans, and border delays that impacted fans, media, players and accredited team delegations.

The report also examines opaque media accreditation processes, policing risks during public demonstrations, and a climate of fear created by lack of clarity and transparency around immigration enforcement (ICE) activity near host sites and stadiums. Finally, it highlights the absence of transparent background checks or eligibility standards for accredited players facing pending criminal cases or serious sexual violence allegations. While the analysis is not exhaustive, we hope the recommendations offered can support meaningful reforms in human rights, transparency and good governance reforms at FIFA.

We look forward to your response and remain at your disposal if you have any questions. We kindly request any response or feedback be shared with us by October 5th so that it can be reflected in our upcoming reporting. We can be contacted by email at andrea@sportandrightsalliance.org.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Andrea Florence
Executive Director
Sport & Rights Alliance

Appendix II

FIFA Letter to Sport & Rights Alliance, October 12, 2026

Sport & Rights Alliance
Andrea Florence
Executive Director

E-Mail: andrea@sportandrightsalliance.org

Zurich, 12th October 2026

RE: Upcoming report on the FIFA World Cup 2026™

Dear Ms. Florence,

FIFA recognizes the important role of the Sport & Rights Alliance (SRA) in advocating for human rights in sport and values our constructive dialogue on the FIFA World Cup 2026™ and on other key human rights topics.

FIFA has carefully reviewed the advance draft of the SRA report on the FIFA World Cup 2026™ and we recognize that it raises important concerns and identifies areas where further progress can be made. At the same time, you will understand that FIFA has a different perspective on a number of the report's claims and broader conclusions.

FIFA's forthcoming FIFA World Cup 2026™ Sustainability and Human Rights Report will provide a comprehensive account of the human rights due diligence carried out in connection with the FIFA World Cup 2026™, including the extensive stakeholder engagement and collaborations, and wide-ranging measures implemented throughout the tournament cycle. We believe this report will provide important additional evidence and context and contribute to a more complete and balanced account of the tournament's human rights impact.

FIFA values its engagement with the Sport & Rights Alliance and other stakeholders, including where perspectives differ. For future reports of this nature, we would appreciate the opportunity to be consulted earlier in the drafting process, allowing us to contribute in a more meaningful way. We remain committed to learning from the experience of the FIFA World Cup 2026™ and continuously strengthening our approach to human rights.

Yours in football,

FIFA

[redacted]

Mattias Grafström
Secretary General

Fédération Internationale de Football Association
www.FIFA.com



We are the Sport & Rights Alliance. Raising the bar for sport, human rights and transparency since 2015.

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