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PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME? HUMAN RIGHTS RISKS LINKED TO THE 2030 AND 2034 FIFA WORLD CUPS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The choice of which countries host the FIFA Men's World Cup is one of the most significant decisions that football's global governing body can make. Hundreds of thousands of workers will be involved in delivering each tournament, over a million fans will travel across borders to watch matches, billions more will watch it on TV or online, and enormous sums will be spent on major infrastructure projects. Host countries will gain huge visibility and prestige, while FIFA's earnings will be vast – projected to reach over US\$11 billion from the next World Cup in 2026.

History shows that the World Cup can be a source of dignity or exploitation, inclusion or discrimination, freedom or repression. FIFA's choice of host for the 2030- and 2034-men's World Cups is therefore both hugely consequential and already controversial. For 2030, FIFA is considering just one bid – jointly by Morocco, Portugal and Spain – with three matches to be played in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. For 2034, only a bid from Saudi Arabia is on the table. One tournament held over three continents, and another in a country with few human rights protections, is set to test FIFA's human rights commitments to the limit.

This report brings together analysis from human rights organizations, trade unions and fans' representatives – including from members of the Sport and Rights Alliance – as well as UN experts, treaty monitoring bodies, government data and media reports. It aims to highlight key risks connected to the hosting of the two World Cups that must be addressed if FIFA and bidding countries are to prevent human rights violations during their preparation and delivery.

FIFA'S HUMAN RIGHTS RESPONSIBILITIES AND COMMITMENTS

Since 2015, FIFA has recognized that it has a responsibility to prevent, address and remedy any adverse human rights impacts from its own activities, and those directly connected to its operations, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UN Guiding Principles). It has since progressively operationalized these Principles in a series of policies, including through human rights requirements that were first introduced in the bidding process to host the 2026 World Cup.

As it did for the 2026 World Cup, FIFA has included human rights standards as part of the bidding requirements for the 2030 and 2034 tournaments. In July 2024, alongside their "Bid books", host candidates must submit a human rights strategy outlining how they will address the human rights risks identified by an "independent human rights context assessment", including "explicit public commitments to sustainability, human rights, sustainable procurement and climate action." The strategy must outline how the bid will comply with a range of UN and FIFA standards on labour rights, non-discrimination, freedom of expression, policing and more. FIFA's bidding regulations make clear that these are "fully binding obligations" that could lead to FIFA not selecting the bid or terminating hosting rights if not met.

The human rights strategies and assessments are supposed to be informed by stakeholder consultation, yet by the end of May 2024 – just over a month before the bidding deadline – Amnesty International is unaware of any such consultation having taken place for either the 2030 or 2034 tournaments, despite requesting FIFA for details and an opportunity to participate.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE 2030 WORLD CUP: MOROCCO, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN

Labour rights

All bidding countries face risks relating to labour rights, which should be addressed through revising legislation, ensuring compliance with international labour standards and ensuring structured social dialogue with independent trade unions. Morocco's plan to host the tournament is likely to involve a significantly higher number of construction work projects than Portugal or Spain – including the planned 115,000 capacity Grand Stade de Casablanca – while all countries will engage large numbers of workers in the service and hospitality sector.

Morocco has a comparatively high accident rate, particularly for construction workers for whom fatal work-related injuries are three times more likely than in other sectors. In response, Morocco has drafted but not yet passed a new law intended to strengthen health and safety. In Portugal and Spain, accidents at work are above the European Union (EU) average, and have been increasing in Spain. Both Morocco and Portugal need to increase the number of labour inspectors by over 50% to meet International Labour Organisation (ILO) benchmarks.

Migrant workers are particularly at risk of exploitation. The experience of migrant workers renovating the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona in 2023 is a stark example. Mohamed, a Moroccan worker, told the newspaper *El Periodico* that he earned less than €4.50 per hour for a 56-hour week, lived in a house without water or electricity and felt “like a slave”. Investigations in Portugal uncovered hundreds of exploited migrant workers, while labour traffickers are reported to target the construction sector. In 2023, a UN Committee expressed concerns about forced labour among migrant workers in Morocco.

The right to join a trade union is recognized in all three countries, yet restrictions persist. In Morocco, the right to strike is recognized in the Constitution, but “obstructing work” can be penalized in law. In its bid for the 2026 World Cup, however, the Moroccan Football Association wrote that it had signed a collective agreement with trade unions. In Portugal and Spain, despite a large majority of workers being covered by collective agreements, Portuguese trade unions have reported increasing pressure on workers not to unionize. Unions in Spain state that employers are able to unilaterally change agreements or ignore obligations.

Among other significant concerns, child labour persists in Morocco's construction sector, while in Spain the unions have criticized excessive working hours. Portugal and Spain have ratified all of the ILO fundamental instruments; Morocco has yet to ratify three relating to the right to organize; forced labour; and occupational health and safety.

Discrimination

Prohibited in Article 4 of its statutes, FIFA recognizes that “discrimination is an issue in the world of football both on and off the pitch.” In 2022, Morocco enshrined equality of men and women in the Family Code and banned discrimination based on sex, yet other legislation perpetuates risks for female workers and attendees at the tournament. The criminalization of extramarital sexual relations and “adultery”, for example, can prevent women from reporting incidents of sexual violence.

In 2018, an evaluation of Morocco's bid to host the 2026 World Cup highlighted that the criminalization of same-sex acts was “particularly problematic”; official statistics show that 838 people were prosecuted between 2017 and 2020 for same-sex conduct. In December 2023, a UN Committee denounced the persistence in Morocco of racism in football, while players including Moussa Ndao from Senegal, and Chancel Mbemba from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), have both been subjected to racist behaviour in stadiums in recent years.

UN experts have praised Portugal's anti-discrimination laws, but criticized the failure to introduce a law to address gender-based violence. Within sport, the National Observatory of Violence Against Athletes received 66 reports of sexual abuse, harassment and violence between September 2020 and December 2023. Portugal's Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, yet in 2022 the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Association (ILGA) Portugal received over 830 requests for support from LGBTI people. A 2020 survey of fans, players, coaches and journalists involved in Portuguese football highlighted that 60% believe there is racism in the sport.

In Spain, three pieces of legislation tackling discrimination were enacted in 2022 and 2023. However, sexism has been starkly illustrated by the discrimination and harassment faced by members of Spain's national women's football team. ILGA reported a record 466 LGBTI hate crimes in 2021 - a 68% increase on the previous year. Domestic football in Spain has continued to be marred by racist acts, with Real Madrid player Vinicius Junior deploring the fact that “since [racists] aren't punished, they are getting stronger”. In the 2021-22 season, just 28 out of 1,608 sanctions imposed by the Commission against Violence, Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance in Sports were in relation to racism or xenophobia.

Forced evictions and affordable housing

With a greater likelihood of large-scale infrastructure projects, the risks of forced evictions may be highest in Morocco where UN experts have previously criticized such violations. The threat of a large influx of visitors also risks exacerbating the severe shortages in affordable housing in Portugal and Spain, including if an increase in the use of short-term holiday rentals leads to increased rents or evictions for existing residents. Rents in Spain have already increased by 45% since 2017, while in Portugal, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing has already warned of the impact of “unbridled touristification”.

Freedom of expression and assembly

All three countries recognize the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in law, but restrict them in practice. These freedoms are both inherently important and essential in realizing other rights of fans, players, journalists and civil society in relation to the World Cup.

Morocco, for example, criminalizes criticism of Islam, the monarchy, state institutions and the military, as well as questioning the country’s territorial integrity in relation to Western Sahara. Journalists and human rights defenders have been harassed, arbitrarily detained, beaten and prosecuted, inviting criticism from UN experts.

Portuguese legislation restricts demonstrations through notification requirements, leading to fines for LGBTI and environmental campaigners. Fans have also faced restrictions and sanctions for “political” banners and chants. In November 2022, Amnesty International Portugal was prevented from distributing campaign t-shirts at the Alvalade Stadium in support of migrant workers in Qatar.

Similarly in Spain, the Citizen Security Law criminalizes certain forms of protest, while some provisions of the Criminal Code relate to insults to the monarchy, state institutions, religious beliefs or the glorification of terrorism, leading to prosecutions of musicians, journalists and social media users. In October 2023, an Eibar fan was expelled from a match for displaying a Palestinian flag.

Policing and fan safety

Police forces in all three countries have used excessive force, within both footballing and broader contexts, including using rubber bullets to disperse crowds in contravention of international standards. Moroccan football has experienced significant violence and mass arrests in recent years. In December 2023 a Portuguese fans’ representative group denounced “an episode of real police barbarity” when Sporting Lisbon fans were beaten with batons. In May 2021, a Sporting Lisbon supporter lost an eye when police used rubber bullets and batons against fans celebrating their title victory.

Spanish police have also been the subject of numerous complaints, including in relation to Champions League fixtures and the 2022 UEFA Europa League Final. A survey carried out by the UK Football Policing Unit found that “the consistent feedback of fans is that the policing style in Spain is confrontational, frequently aggressive and on occasions violent”. A representative of a Spanish football supporters’ group told Amnesty International that the police rarely engage in dialogue and often treat fans “like cattle”.

There is a risk of racialized policing in all bidding countries. A survey published in March 2024 showed that two out of three respondents (68%) were concerned about the existence of advocacy of hatred, violence and discrimination within Portugal’s police forces. In November 2022, Portuguese journalists identified 591 police officers responsible for spreading hateful and racist messages online. In Spain, a 2022 survey showed that 14% of people of African descent had been stopped by police in the previous year, one of the highest rates in the EU.

The growing use of invasive spyware and biometric surveillance may also threaten the right to privacy of World Cup attendees. Human rights defenders in Morocco, as well as Catalan politicians, journalists and their families in Spain, have been targeted with Pegasus spyware. In 2023, La Liga, the top professional division of the Spanish men’s football league, were warned by Spain’s data protection regulator that a tender for a facial recognition system would breach data protection laws.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE 2034 WORLD CUP: SAUDI ARABIA

The risk of serious human rights violations related to the 2034 World Cup in Saudi Arabia are extremely high, both because of the scale of projects required and the country’s weak rights protections. Saudi Arabia’s continued refusal to ratify both international human rights covenants, as well as a number of core ILO conventions, raises serious questions about the credibility of any public commitments requested by FIFA.

Labour rights

Saudi Arabia will need to build or renovate at least 10 stadiums to meet FIFA's capacity requirements, in addition to a range of enormous infrastructure projects. A huge number of workers will be involved, with 200,000 to be hired by 2025 to build the vast new "smart city" – and likely World Cup venue – of NEOM alone. With foreign nationals making up over 80% of the private sector workforce, Saudi Arabia will rely heavily on migrant workers to do so.

Discrimination is embedded in Saudi Arabia's laws, including the *kafala* sponsorship system, in which a migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to their sponsor. Despite some partial reforms in recent years, this system leaves workers with limited recourse when subjected to abuses such as wage theft, excessive working hours, passport confiscation or unsafe conditions. Migrant workers are also excluded from Saudi Arabia's minimum wage and banned from joining a trade union. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has described the country's violations of workers' rights as "systematic".

The reality for many migrant workers can be seen from the experiences of workers at Amazon warehouses in Saudi Arabia, whose treatment is likely to have amounted to human trafficking. Workers toiling in extreme heat may also face deadly health and safety risks, with authorities failing to take action to prevent, investigate or compensate deaths. An investigation by The Guardian newspaper highlighted that four Bangladeshi nationals died every day in Saudi Arabia in 2022, of which 76% were recorded simply as from "natural causes".

Foreign nationals also face other severe human rights violations. In 2022, Amnesty International documented the detention of Ethiopian migrants who were held in inhuman and cruel conditions and subjected to torture before being forcibly returned to their home country. A 2023 Human Rights Watch report accused Saudi border guards of having killed at least hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers between March 2022 and June 2023. According to official figures, the Saudi authorities arrested 770,000 people for "violating labour, residency and border security" regulations in 2023, and returned at least 468,000 foreign nationals to their home country.

Discrimination

Despite some limited reforms lifting travel restrictions on women and permitting them to drive and enter sports stadiums, women and girls continue to face discrimination, including through the entrenchment of the male guardianship system. Women working at or attending the World Cup face risks of abuse and barriers to justice. Zina rules, for example, criminalize sex outside marriage and are often used to silence victims of labour abuse and sexual violence. Women such as Manahel al-Otaibi have been prosecuted for their choice of clothes and expression online.

Saudi Arabia prohibits any public practice of a religion other than Islam, while the country's Shia Muslim minority also face particular discrimination. This manifested itself in football in 2024 when Saudi authorities sentenced 12 Shia supporters of Al Safa Football Club to prison terms ranging from six months to one year, solely for reciting a folkloric religious chant. Beyond football, over 100 Shia activists have been tried before the notorious Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) on vague and wide-ranging charges arising from their opposition to the government.

Under the country's interpretation of sharia law, sexual relations outside marriage, including "adultery", extramarital and same-sex relations, are prohibited. A leaked draft of a new penal code will further codify this prohibition, while "cross-dressing" is already punished with prison sentences of up to three years. People in Saudi Arabia have been imprisoned and subjected to lashings for using social media to arrange same-sex dates, and prosecuted under the country's public order and morality regulations, as well as the Anti-Cybercrime Law. Despite this, the Saudi Tourism Board claims that "everyone is welcome to visit Saudi Arabia and visitors are not asked to disclose such personal details."

Forced evictions

Forced evictions have already been documented in prospective World Cup host cities. In NEOM, human rights organization ALQST has reported that members of the Huwaitat tribe faced compulsory evictions and land expropriations in violation of international law. In response to residents' resistance to being moved, Saudi government forces used lethal violence, killing Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, while authorities also sentenced 15 members of the tribe to prison terms of up to 50 years. In May 2024, a Saudi colonel told the BBC that security forces received an order that "licensed the use of lethal force against whoever stayed in their home."

In Jeddah, Amnesty International found that large-scale demolitions affecting more than 558,000 residents have been characterized by inconsistent notice periods and inadequate compensation that entirely excluded foreign nationals, who made up 47% of those evicted.

Freedom of expression

In Saudi Arabia, there is little or no freedom of expression, association or assembly. No independent human rights organizations, political parties or trade unions are permitted, while recent years have seen sweeping arrests and imprisonment of journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, writers, clerics and women's rights activists. Repression extends to online spaces. In a series of landmark cases in recent years, Salma al-Shehab was sentenced to 27 years in prison for tweeting in favour of gender equality, Nourah bin Saeed al-Qahtani received a sentence of 45 years, and Mohammad al-Ghamdi was sentenced to death.

Broadly defined anti-terrorism legislation introduced in 2017 has been used to prosecute activists, imposing prison sentences of up to 30 years and even the death penalty for insulting the King or Crown Prince. It also restricts assemblies by criminalizing acts of "disturbing public order," while those who have protested have paid harsh penalties. Many of the 81 people executed in a single day in March 2022 had taken part in anti-government protests. They included Mohammad al-Shakhouri, who was tortured and who lost most of his teeth after security officers repeatedly punched him in the face.

No independent media exists in Saudi Arabia and journalists who criticize the government face censorship, repression and imprisonment. Most prominently this includes the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 35 journalists have been arrested between 2012 and 2024 in Saudi Arabia, including 10 in 2019 alone.

There is little sign of improvements on the horizon - a leaked draft penal code analysed by Amnesty International in 2024 would further entrench the criminalization of free expression.

Privacy and surveillance

The planned use of technology in "smart cities" such as NEOM may pose risks of mass surveillance at the World Cup, while the Saudi Arabian authorities have adopted new technologies to hack the online accounts of government critics and intercept communications. Saudi Arabia has also faced legal action over the use of Pegasus spyware to target and hack the phones of women's rights activists, political dissidents, journalists and their family members.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are serious human rights risks that must be proactively addressed in relation to the 2030 FIFA World Cup in Morocco, Portugal and Spain, while the risks associated with hosting the 2034 tournament in Saudi Arabia are of a different magnitude and severity. Indeed, it is hard to see how a World Cup could be hosted in the country without widespread violations, unless fundamental reforms are agreed and complied with.

There is no greater test of FIFA's commitment to its human rights policies than how it awards, prepares and delivers its flagship tournament. It can choose to address risks and seize opportunities for change or risk global football risks being marred by human rights violations for years to come. More detailed and country-specific recommendations are provided at the end of the full report, but in summary:

- FIFA should ensure a rigorous and transparent bidding process, based on meaningful stakeholder participation, including genuinely independent human rights risk assessments and comprehensive human rights strategies.
- FIFA and national authorities should agree to binding commitments, including legal reforms, to prevent human rights violations connected to the tournament, particularly in relation to labour rights, discrimination, housing, freedom of expression, policing and privacy, before any decision is finalized.
- FIFA should be prepared not to award the rights to host the World Cup until such agreements are made, and until it is clear that human rights violations can and will be prevented, mitigated and remedied. FIFA should also retain the option of terminating hosting rights if human rights commitments are not kept.
- FIFA and national authorities should develop rigorous systems to monitor and enforce the implementation of human rights commitments, including grievance mechanisms and access to effective remedy throughout preparation and delivery phases.
- FIFA and national authorities should ensure meaningful stakeholder participation throughout the bidding process and in the preparation of the World Cups, including with rights holders that encompass groups facing discrimination, civil society organizations, trade unions, fans' representatives and players' unions.