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The World Cup and human rights: Qatar 2022 and Argentina 1978

Qatar, a country with no tradition in the game of soccer but possessing trillions of Petrodollars, was selected by FIFA (the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association*) to host the 2022 World Cup. This was in the main due to the Qatari regime's extensive business relations with the largest world economies, and its services to US imperialism, which maintains up to 10,000 troops at the Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base. Along with naked political pressure, FIFA's long history of payola and corruption played their part.



Argentina's Mario Kempes celebrating goal against the Netherlands at 1978 World Cup in Buenos Aires. [Photo: El Gráfico]

Over the years, FIFA has been transformed into a mafia-like cartel. FIFA officials have gone to jail for filling their pockets with millions of dollars, making a mockery of the

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billions of people who cherish the World Cup. FIFA alone anticipates revenues of over \$7.5 billion, while Qatar expects the games to add \$17 billion to its economy.

This year's World Cup has been overshadowed by the gross oppression and human rights violations committed by Qatar's despotic ruling monarchy, including in the preparations of the games themselves, which required the building from scratch of stadiums and other facilities. The work was done by South Asian migrant workers, forced to work under slave-like and dangerous conditions for starvation wages. In the decade following FIFA's selection of Qatar to host the World Cup in 2010, a total of more than 15,000 migrants lost their lives, according to Amnesty International. Many more suffered life-altering injuries, for which few have been compensated.

The role played by massive amounts of money and sinister political forces in corrupting and discrediting the "beautiful game" is nothing new, as has been spelled out with the release of a trove of documents on the hosting of the 1978 Cup by a country then ruled by one of the most brutal dictatorships on the face of the planet, Argentina.

On November 25, 2022, as the Qatar World Cup soccer games were underway, 27 declassified documents on the 1978 Argentina World Cup were made public by human rights organizations, *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, *el Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS)* y *Memoria Abierta*. The 27 documents, in English, are part of a cache of thousands of documents put together as a three year project by the human rights groups, with the assistance of students and academicians. They can be accessed through the portal desclasificados.org.ar (by scrolling down to *Colección Mundial 1978*).

The documents reveal the joint strategy of the military dictatorship and US imperialism to exploit the games in order to "preserve" Argentina's ruling military junta's "image in the international order."

Under the military regime that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983, at least 30,000 workers, students, trade unionists and left-wing activists were "disappeared" and murdered. Many tens of thousands more suffered torture and imprisonment.

The declassified documents reveal that months before the 1978 World Cup began, a US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report had shown the Carter administration's concern that public information from foreign press sources about the brutal repression going on in Argentina could ignite riots across the world, and suggested that this major sports event should be a priority for the military and security forces, as a form of what today is known as *sportswashing*, or shifting international public opinion with the World Cup spectacle.

The objective, according to the declassified files, was to “defuse criticism of human rights.’ To this end, the military junta headed by Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla invited the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to make a special visit to the country. It hinted at the possible release of arrested union leaders and the suspension of some restrictions on freedom of the press.

At the same time, in the name of national security, the dictatorship had organized special units to arrest and threaten to wipe out any organized opposition which could endanger the holding of the World Cup in Argentina.

The Argentine butchers were clearly afraid that hosting the World Cup could backfire, further exposing its brutal repression. Such fears were fueled by a global campaign for a boycott of the games, which were compared to the Berlin Olympics held in Nazi Germany in 1936.

The documents also expose the concern by the Pentagon and US intelligence agencies over the threat of an eruption of the class struggle in Argentina, ignited by a potential railroad strike in the midst of the World Cup. One DIA document warned that a walkout by rail workers could “lead to other sympathetic strikes” and noted with apparent sympathy the “difficulties the government has in identifying where the actual [railroad workers’] leadership exists. This is being closely watched.”

Argentina’s military dictator General Videla and his advisor, the war criminal and former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who today faces an arrest warrant that prevents him from leaving the US for crimes against humanity, directly intervened to influence the outcome of the 1978 World Cup, which crowned Argentina as world champion.

The chances of Argentina making it to the final were extremely low after Brazil had beaten Poland 3–1. This result gave Brazil an advantage of five goals. The Argentine squad had to defeat Peru by at least five goals in the semi-final match.

What followed was one of the most shameful events in the history of the sport, the visit of Videla and Kissinger to the Peruvian locker room.

As former Peruvian soccer player José Velásquez later recounted, “Videla went into the dressing room with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, supposedly to wish us luck. What did they have to do there? It was a way of pressuring us and seeing those who had sold out.”

Another player, Roberto Moquera, declared: “I saw [Videla] in the locker room and it disgusted me. I was 20 years old and I didn’t shake his hand. When a president enters the locker room with that kind of arrogance, they are abusing you, because you can’t do

anything. He is using his power to subdue you psychologically. You feel assaulted and abused.”

Even the Argentine players were ashamed by the presence of the butcher president after the 6–0 victory over Peru.

Leopoldo Jacinto Luque, a member of the Argentine soccer team, who personally scored two goals against Peru, recounted at the time how the jubilation over the victory was suddenly cut short by Videla’s abrupt entrance into the locker room: “With his cowardly macho voice he told us ‘Very well, boys, we’ve reached the final. The World Cup closes with us. The goal was to reach the final and now we are going for the title.’ Not a word more, not a word less.”

Years later, in testimony before an Argentine special human rights court, former Peruvian senator Genaro Ledesma declared that the Peruvian government had agreed to throw the match as part of a deal with the Videla junta to assist in “disappearing” Peruvian political prisoners. Ledesma, a trade union organizer in Peru, recounted that he and 12 other Peruvian trade unionists had been shipped to Argentina to be imprisoned and tortured.

River Plate stadium, where the 1978 Argentina-Peru match took place, is only 10 blocks from the Navy School of Mechanics (ESMA), the main clandestine detention center in Buenos Aires, where political prisoners were tortured and exterminated. From there many of the prisoners would be drugged, loaded onto helicopters and dumped into the ocean. Pregnant women were held there, only to be murdered after giving birth, their babies handed over to the families of military officers and regime supporters.

The macabre proximity of the games to one of the junta’s principal torture centers meant that prisoners could hear clearly the football chants. Some were even invited to join their torturers to view the games on television, and even go out for a ride among the celebrating crowds, only to later be murdered, tossed either semi-conscious or already dead from aircraft into the sea.

ESMA is now a museum in memory of the victims of the Videla dictatorship. In 2018, at the opening of an exhibit marking the 40th anniversary of the Argentina World Cup, an ESMA survivor described the day of the Argentina-Peru game:

I remember that we saw the Argentina-Peru game in the basement. I was with a comrade, another witness, a word that I prefer because the word ‘survivor’ brings up so much suffering. We won 6-0 and obviously we were happy. At that moment we heard the sound of slamming doors —which used to happen when they brought in another kidnap victim.

As we left, we went from that small euphoria to seeing one of our comrades on the floor, dead, quickly bringing us back to the reality of where we were.

The newly released files on the 1978 Buenos Aires World Cup add to the already existing information on the crimes against humanity committed by the Argentine dictatorship and its US allies: documents on the disappeared, the appropriation of their children and Operation Condor, the CIA-backed coordination by Latin America's military dictatorships in hunting down and killing their opponents.

The mass killing, repression and torture that were carried out in Argentina and throughout much of Latin America in the 1970s is the bitter legacy of US imperialism's domination which is still felt to this day. The deepening crisis of Latin American and global capitalism combined with the upsurge in the class struggle once again raises the threat that the region's venal ruling classes backed by Washington will return to the bloody methods that the 1978 World Cup was meant to whitewash.

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