

Statement by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the Panel discussion on the possibility of using sport and the Olympic ideal to promote human rights for all, including persons with disabilities

Geneva, 28 June 2016

Excellencies,

Colleagues and friends,

A few weeks ago, the outpouring of public emotion following the death of Mohamed Ali reminded us of the extraordinary impact that sports can have. Few activities can claim to bring joy and inspiration to so many, or such diverse, groups of people. Today, we are privileged to have on the podium today two athletes who I'm sure have witnessed this.

Sports can be a strong force for equality and diversity. They also explore ethical issues, such as responsible teamwork, compliance with the rules of the game, and the simple fairness that maintains real and equal access for all.

Fairness, equality, celebration of our shared humanity, and wonder at the tremendous ability of athletes to surpass the apparent limits of the human body – these values instinctively match our human rights message. As the Advisory Committee pointed out in its report, sports can be "a channel to promote equal opportunities for education, health, gender and ethnic equality, and to protect the rights of persons with disabilities and the environment, among others."

As we enter a summer that promises to be rich in sports events, and with the Euro 2016 competition already underway, this panel offers a timely opportunity to look at ways we can use the almost universal appeal of sports to amplify our human rights messages and reach out to millions of fans.

Excellencies,

More can be done to make our sports competitions the best they can be.

Sports stars such as Jesse Owens, Jérôme Boateng, Serena Williams, Zinedine Zidane, Martina Navratilova or Yao Ming, to mention just a few, have had enormous positive impact on the struggle for racial and gender equality. Many national teams in the Euro football championships feature players – like Austria's David Alaba – whose roots span the whole globe. In a continent shaken by the fear of foreigners, their successes speak more for integration than many lectures – and blaze a path for many children and teenagers to follow. But despite these great achievements, not enough has been done to push back the discrimination and intolerance which is still much too common in sports. Racist or homophobic abuse and attacks – sometimes not only violent but repeated attacks – are suffered by athletes, referees and spectators, from school clubs to the professional leagues.

The sanction is too often a slap on the wrist. Hooliganism and disrespectful behavior is still rampant in football, as we have sadly witnessed in recent weeks. Women athletes also face pervasive derogatory and sexist remarks and attitudes all over the world and in some countries, even today, girls and women are prevented from participating in sports at all.

Discrimination deprives athletes and enthusiasts of dignity, opportunities, choices and rights.

It hurts the sport, by cutting off skills and talents – and it hurts spectators, and all society, by implying that prejudice and injustice are acceptable. It is vital that we eliminate racism, homophobia and discrimination against women from all areas of society – and because sports have such a powerful hold on the human imagination, the progress that we make on and off the pitch can have huge impact, much more broadly.

Many actors in international and regional federations, clubs and youth leagues are realising that they must take action. My Office has engaged with the Russian sports authorities to ensure that appropriate policies and steps will be an integral part of the preparations for the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. The role of football supporters to achieve this goal will be indispensable. We are coordinating these efforts with FIFA, and look forward to extending this work to other types of sporting events.

All governments must fulfil their obligations to put in place comprehensive legislation and policies that prevent, prohibit and combat all forms of discrimination, without exception. I also urge investigations and prosecution of incidents of harassment, violence and discrimination by fans, officials and clubs. I welcome the recent inclusion in the Olympic Charter of a prohibition on discrimination against athletes on the basis of sexual orientation. We need many more initiatives to combat homophobia in – and through – sports, around the world.

People with disabilities frequently encounter major obstacles to their participation in sports. Among us today are two Paralympic athletes who have captured our admiration by overcoming such challenges with strength and grace. But despite the tremendous success of the Paralympics, which have enabled the celebration of para-athletes' achievements throughout society, sports organisations routinely refuse to enable people with disabilities to train for, or participate in, competitive sporting events and recreational sports activities. Women with disabilities face double discrimination, and as a result, 93% are not involved in sports at all.

Under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, governments agree to ensure that all people, but in particular children, have access to sports activities, and that people with disabilities can access sporting venues and have access to services from those involved in the organization of sporting activities. It is time to put those commitments into effect.

I also urge authorities at every level to do much more to integrate human rights and to promote equality and non-discrimination in sports, particularly through educational programmes, so that children and adults learn to value and respect human diversity.

I would like to raise an additional and important issue in this context. Major sporting events have very frequently been associated with serious violations of international labor standards and human rights – becoming shabby examples of some of the worst human instincts, alongside the best. Recurring areas of concern include forced evictions, deaths and exploitation of construction workers, including migrant workers; sweatshop labour; restrictions on the right to protest; misuse of public funds; and the sexual exploitation of human beings, including children, in the context of the arrival of large numbers of spectators. We must turn this situation around. Major sporting events can become poles of human rights excellence, inspiring people to do better across society. The report commissioned by FIFA

from former SRSG John Ruggie on how to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in FIFA's activities and operations has lessons and recommendations that are worthy of very widespread dissemination.

States have a duty to protect human rights; and sports associations and other actors have a responsibility to respect human rights. They must ensure that human rights are not harmed through their activities, and properly address any harms that do occur. OHCHR has joined with other key stakeholders to develop better ways to prevent, mitigate and remedy abuses of labour standards and human rights associated with mega sporting events, from bidding rounds through to legacy.

Excellencies,

All of us recognize that sporting events should celebrate the joy of human potential, not generate abuse or feed hatred based on narrow views of "us" and "them". This year, ten athletes will be competing in the Olympics as a team of refugees – the first-time people from many different countries have come together at the Olympic Games, to surpass national barriers and create a team based on a shared experience of suffering. I will be applauding their resilience and fortitude. And I hope their participation will inspire a new understanding, by spectators and officials, for the rights of the millions of people caught up in crises, around the world, where what is at stake is not medals and glory – but the right to life, to safety, and to dignity.

Thank you.