
HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME: THE CONTRIBUTION OF SPORT TO THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS



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Children's Soccer Team Denied Visas to Sydney Human Rights Conference

The visit of a young African soccer team to Sydney invited to be special guests at an international conference on sport and human rights has been called off after Australian immigration officials rejected their visa request.

The Millenium Stars, are teenage footballers with a difference - young and traumatized survivors of the Liberian civil war. When these boys should have been playing ball they were forced to fight as child-soldiers in a vicious civil war. Other team members lost family and home.

The team's story has attracted international publicity and they will be touring major soccer clubs in England in September. Their visit to Australia was to have been their first outside of Liberia.

"How You Play the Game", the sport and human rights conference, will be opened by the Governor General, Sir William Deane, on September 1st. The conference has attracted speakers from the USA, Canada, Europe and South Africa.

Australian immigration officials rejected the Millennium Stars request for visas on the basis that they were not satisfied that the reasons for their visit were genuine.

This is despite an official invitation and supporting documentation from Caritas Australia, the Catholic overseas aid and development agency. Apart from giving a special dramatized performance of their story at the human rights conference the boys were looking forward to talks and soccer clinics with schools in Sydney and Newcastle. A training session with the Sydney Swans, a soccer match with a visiting Japanese youth team and a tour of the Olympics site were also organized and the boys had been invited to a special reception by the Governor General.

"They were very special guests at the Conference because their story expressed the power of sport to transform lives and provide hope - one of the main themes of the conference," said Andre Frankovits, Executive Director of the Human Rights Council of Australia. The boys were also to spread awareness in Australia of the need for international action to end the use of children as soldiers.

Father Joe Glackin, a Scottish priest who has been working with the boys in Liberia, faxed Caritas Australia with the news. "I couldn't believe it after the assurances we had received. I have some very disappointed young people here... It is really a bad situation especially coming out of their situation of distrust and betrayal".

Father Glackin was put in a difficult situation as he alone was granted a visa, a move the boys saw as racially motivated.

"These boys wanted to share their amazing story of hope, sport and reconciliation with Australians as we prepare for the Olympics," said Mr. Frankovits. "Instead this refusal has shattered their hopes and raised serious questions over how Australian immigration officials will handle teams and fans coming from Africa to the Olympics."

Background

Father Glackin learnt of the visa refusal on Friday 13 August but because of communications problems between Liberia and Australia was only able to inform Caritas Australia and the Human Rights Council on Tuesday 17 August. He was told that the decision was final and irrevocable. On the basis of this he had to tell the boys who were dismayed, hurt and angry.

Caritas Australia and the Human Rights Council immediately sought to give further assurances to the Department of Immigration including the offer of 24-hour supervision and secure accommodation at a Sydney boarding school. The Minister's Office and the High Commissioner in Lagos indicated that the boys could apply again for visas.

The Australian High Commission in Lagos then contacted Father Glackin. In this conversation it became clear that the traumatic experiences the boys faced in being made to fight as young children, their loss of family and homes and the fact they had not travelled out of Liberia before would all count against them. It seems that immigration officials did not treat each application on its individual merit as three of the boys had current visas for their forthcoming tour to the UK stamped in their passports and others have strong family ties in Liberia.

High Commission officials told Father Joe Glackin that they would make the same decision if the boys applied again.

Further contact with the Minister for Immigration failed to obtain any indication that new visa applications would be treated any differently or that the assurances provided by the Church in Liberia or organizations in Australia would be sufficient to satisfy the Department.

To make the visa application requires travelling from Liberia to the Australian High Commission in Nigeria. Without some assurance that the boys would not suffer a further rejection Caritas Australia had little choice but to cancel the tickets.

The irony of the boys being refused visas to be special guests at the first international conference on sport and human rights is hard to miss. The young footballers' moving tale of reconciliation and rehabilitation through sport was to be a highlight of the conference.

Members of the Millenium stars are part of a team - the power of their story is the extent to which coming together through sport has provided them with bonds, stability and trust which has helped them to get over awful experiences.

Carefully selected from the Millenium Stars squad for this visit by the Don Bosco priests because of the leadership and motivational role that they can play with other children when they return, the boys are proud of being Liberian and see themselves as young ambassadors for their country - able to present a positive image of their country, much as their hero and FIFA World Footballer of the year George Weah has done.

One major theme of the conference is the role of sport in overcoming racism. The Millenium Stars now feel they are victims of this on top of everything else they have suffered.

African countries must now be wondering how Australian immigration officials will handle African sporting teams participating in the Olympics and African sports fans that want to come to Australia to watch the Games.

The Human Rights Council has invited the Minister for Immigration to address the Conference on this issue.

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Pictures and video of the Millenium Stars are available. Father Joe Glackin is also available to speak from Liberia.

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