

PRESS RELEASE

PALESTINE NATIONAL YOUTH FOOTBALL TEAM REFUSED VISAS TO UK

The British Government has refused to issue visas for travel to England for the Palestine National Youth Football Team. The team was due to arrive today (21st August) for a three-week tour of the UK. Visas were refused both to Palestinians living in Palestine, and refugees domiciled elsewhere. The official reason given for refusing the visitors visas is that the Palestinians are too poor to be trusted to return home.

The Entry Clearance Officer at the Jerusalem Consulate said, “The refusal has been taken at the highest level in London. It is in line with current immigration policy”.

Rod Cox, the organiser of the tour that would have seen the Palestinians play Chester City, Tranmere Rovers and Blackburn Rovers, as well as undergo an intensive 3 week training course and visit Asian community football projects said;

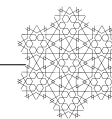
“The decision is incredible. Only a few months ago the Foreign Office was considering funding this scheme under the ‘Engagement with Islam’ programme. They recognised that the positive nature of engaging people in sport both in Palestine and in the UK helps to keep young men out of the hands of the gunmen. But the ‘Engaging with Islam’ programme has been completely terminated, and no grants will be given this year. This tour is supported by the English FA; the Professional Footballer’s Association and was undertaken in Partnership with the University of Chester. Specialist Coaches gave their time freely, and literally hundreds of people have helped.”

He goes on to say, “The tour has support groups in Halifax, Bradford, Leeds, London and Liverpool as well as Blackburn and Chester. It is also financially supported by Islamic Charities such as Interpal and Friends of Al Aqsa as well as the official bodies, and they all saw it as a bridge building exercise. Now I cannot see any other outcome than an alienation of all these people from the British Government as a result of this decision. If even I think that this result looks like a racially motivated decision that helps to perpetuate Israeli Control over Palestinians then I am fairly certain that this is the message that will seep through to Britain’s 2 million Muslims’. It is particularly galling that on the 8th September the Israeli National team will be in the UK to play England without needing visas.”

The guiding principle of the tour was defined by the words of the American born striker for Palestine Morad Fareed:

“Football is one of the very few institutions that Palestine has to compete, to show our statehood, to be on the world stage”

The tour’s main purpose was to express this sense of nationhood for Palestine in the UK and is called “Palestine - Something to Cheer About” According to Rod Cox, “Stopping the Tour is therefore an insult to the whole nation of Palestine”



Truce International (an organisation set up to seek peace through passion for football) is also offering support to this cause. Nancy Dell'Olio, Chairman says:

“The tour is a perfect example of disparate cultural groups working together to use the energy and camaraderie of football to positively introduce different cultures to each other. The search for excellence and the focus on improvement gives many children in impoverished circumstances a reason for living, and it definitely works to take children away from violence and guns, things they pick up when they have nothing to do, and all hope taken away from them. This decision of the British Government will be seen in Gaza, where most of the team originate, as siding with the enemy. To refuse a national team admission solely on the grounds that they are too poor and deprived to be trusted to visit the UK will not do Britain any good abroad. The lives of these boys, who have worked so hard to achieve the position they are in, are just being thrown away.”

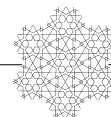
Nancy Dell'Olio will continue to show her support by attending a fund-raising dinner for the absent team at Chester Town Hall on the 1st September. The visit has also attracted support from the following VIPs, The Bishop of Chester, Alexei Sayle, Mark Steel and Jeremy Hardy, and Marcel Khalife, a Unesco appointed 'Artist for Peace' who lives in Texas and performed at a sell-out gig at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall in July 2007.

The Palestine Football teams have been dogged by bad luck and lack of support from those in power; in 2005 the Israelis prevented the Palestinians competing in Football, including detaining players in Gaza during a world cup qualifier. They also prevented the entire team leaving Gaza for an Asian Cup qualifier against Singapore in 2006, and locked the team out for over a month after they competed in Jordan in June this year.

The effects of this refusal are catastrophic for the organisation. Even if the team were able to come at a different time, it may be impossible to accommodate them, since the principle partner, the University of Chester, will not have the accommodation available in term time, the League teams have needed a very considerable lead time to commit to the matches in a busy schedule, and the coaches, all of whom were giving their time voluntarily, will not be available.

Comprehension exercise to go with the Press Statement

1. Who refused to allow the Palestinian football team visas?
2. What reason was given for the refusal?
3. Who organised the tour?
4. Why was the tour organised?
5. Which British organisations supported the tour?
6. Why does Ron Cox think that the decision could be seen as racially motivated?
7. Why does TRUCE International support the tour?
8. How does TRUCE think the decision will be viewed in Israel?
9. How else have Palestinian football teams been discriminated against?
10. Why is it not possible to rearrange the tour?



USEFUL LINKS

Wikipedia entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestine_national_football_team

CAPE—Chester and Palestine Exchanges www.palestinefootball.myzen.co.uk/

BBC playing for Palestine http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/1147_palestine/

Petition—Palestinian National Football Team Sabotaged www.petitiononline.com/FIFAPal/petition.html

Mark Steel: Oi! Referee! That footballer's Palestinian! <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/mark-steel/mark-steel-oi-referee-that-footballers-palestinian-462493.html>

Donald Macintyre: The decision to prevent the Palestinian Under-19 team from playing in Britain is a blow <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/donald-macintyre-the-decision-to-prevent-the-palestinian-under19-team-from-playing-in-britain-is-a-blow-463165.html>

Video—Palestinian National Football Team
www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhxopCmOEFc