

RESCUING SPORT FROM ITSELF

Words of welcome by Jens Sejer Andersen
Director, Play the Game

Dear Mr. Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, dear Minister, Members of Parliament, dear speakers, colleagues, playmates and friends, distinguished guests:

Although it would be appropriate to begin this speech by recognising the impressive personal and professional commitment that has driven so many of you to criss-cross the world and come here to help rescuing sport from itself, I take the liberty of drawing your attention to some people who for very different reasons are not with us today - although invited.

PHOTO ZAW THET HTWE

The first is Zaw Thet Htwe who would very much like to go, but is not allowed to. He was once an Editor-In-Chief of the most popular printed publication in Burma, the sports magazine First Eleven.

In the spring of 2003, Zaw Thet Htwe raised a question about what happened to around 4 million US-dollars granted by world football organisation FIFA to develop Burmese football.

The answer from the military regime came in July 2003 when Zaw Thet Htwe was arrested together with a group of dissidents of the regime and charged with high treason. Although the Burmese military regime denies it, many events suggest that the soccer articles were an important trigger for his arrest.

The trial took place without prior police investigation, interrogations were made by the Military Intelligence Services, no articles were presented to document the charges, witnesses were only called for the prosecution, and after a trial behind closed doors Zaw Thet Htwe received his sentence in November 2003: The death penalty.

While Zaw Thet Htwe spent many months waiting on death row, a campaign was launched to release him on the occasion of the upcoming European Soccer Championships in 2004. The campaign had some success: His sentence was later reduced to two years in prison, and in January this year he was released. Looking for the truth about soccer cost him 18 months in prison and some torments we would not like to think about.

Today, Zaw Thet Htwe cannot work at First Eleven. He makes a living writing scripts for movies, and needs according to himself to keep – and I quote - “a low profile”. That is why no statement from him reaches you today.

The campaign to release him was led by Amnesty International and Reporters Sans Frontières who appealed to the sports community for support. And how many international sports federations ran to support a man whose life was in danger because he had helped them fight abuse of sports money? Did FIFA? Did UEFA? Did the IOC?

You can give it a guess.

I can help you by indicating that the number is exactly the same as in the case of the three violent attacks against Greek sports journalists over the past year, and in any of the other 11 recent cases of murder or violence against sports journalists that Play the Game has compiled.

ZAW THET HTWE FADES

Although we must trust the international sports organisations when they increasingly express their worry about corruption and other economic irregularities in their own ranks, we regret to note that they are still very far from leading a credible policy that match their words.

Take for instance the anti-corruption fighters at the core of the International Volleyball Federation, the FIVB, one of the biggest and wealthiest international federations. Their reaction when we invited their president Mario Acosta to challenge the corruption charges that Mario Goijman will present tomorrow was to declare our debate illegal.

Unless we withdrew the invitation to Mr. Goijman, they would take legal action against us. We explained that there is no paragraph in Danish law which forbids people to speak at conferences. Therefore, Mr. Goijman, we look forward to your lecture tomorrow with great anticipation, but most likely the FIVB does not.

The president of another quite big, rich and influential federation recently expressed his disgust with the greed and the power of money in sport in a letter to the Financial Times. I am of course referring to FIFA. But I wonder what FIFA dislikes the most: Corruption or conferences against corruption.

FIFA has been invited to send representatives to any debate at Play the Game of their own choice: Match fixing, doping, illegal trade with players, media issues... whatever. But FIFA has rejected the invitations flatly and with no explanation. A top FIFA executive has even spent time and energy on calling someone who tried to help us and asking "if he had a problem".

This is typical for the way FIFA creates the climate of anxiety and fear to speak out, a climate that extends from the inner circles of world soccer's governing body and to very remote surroundings. I could give innumerable examples, but in order not to compromise anyone, I also choose to keep silent.

FIFA may have a problem with Play the Game, and when a number of investigative journalists unveil their research into FIFA's affairs Tuesday evening, you can judge by yourselves whether or not this problem is justified.

Yes, many big sports federations face a long learning process if they really want to contribute to an ethical, transparent, accountable and democratic society as they claim.

So the least we can do is to give them a helping hand – shouldn't we?

Over the coming days, there will be plenty of opportunities to search knowledge, express opinions and look for solutions to how we can get sports organisations back on the idealistic track they once followed.

Sport has an unrivalled clout in our global village – it affects our lifestyle, our health, our culture, our economy, our politics, our media, our mindsets in a way that sometimes go beyond imagination.

Right now - in a European country some 1500 kilometres south of here – there are serious discussions whether this nation should suspend its legislation for a period of two weeks while a major sport event is taking place.

Can you think of any other civil institution in our communities who has the power to demand that laws are abandoned when the institution comes visiting?

The power of sport is fascinating, seductive and also thought-provoking and potentially dangerous. The old saying that power corrupts certainly also applies to sport.

But why should we care? Why should we challenge, question and test these organisations that offer such a successful culture to the world? As I see it, for two reasons:

Firstly, democratic societies can not allow that a very big sector completely escapes the written laws and unwritten rules of democracy: Sport must, like anyone else, allow the public to know what is going on, allow the media to question and allow the legitimate authorities to monitor their practices. If not, the sports world will become a shelter for shady people and dubious interests – which in some countries has already happened.

Secondly, sport itself should be kept as a source of joy, health and life skills – such as it is convincingly described in the declarations behind the United Nations Year of Sport that Mr. Ogi will talk about later today.

Sport leaves such a strong mark on the minds and hearts of our children and young people that it must not fall in the hands of those who mainly see sport as a source of profit or a stepping stone to prestige and political power. When children learn that winning is more important than playing – and a lot of children do these days – we have already lost the first battle.

In the coming days Play the Gamewill expose the dark sides of sport, we will analyse what is not entirely black or white, and we will look for proposals than can turn the development of sport in a more encouraging direction: Be it guidelines for countering corruption in sport, be it new ways of organising sports debate, be it new institutions to monitor the sports community: A new kind of WADA concerned with financial doping, perhaps?

By arriving here you have already made this conference the biggest international event ever with a focus on sports corruption. The biggest, yes, but will it also be the best? That will depend on the efforts each and everyone here does from now until Thursday afternoon.

Play the Game is a term from the childhood of modern sport, from a time where sport was meant to build noble characters and healthy communities. Play the Game means play by the rules, play fairly.

I hope you will bear this in mind over the next days. We may raise strong and emotional issues, but we also look out for a fair and constructive debate. That can be assured if we remember that our opponent is not an enemy, but a potential friend that may possess the little piece of truth that makes our own picture complete.

In this group of people I am sure that there is a lot of help to get for any of us. When I recently looked closely at the list of participants, and as I have been meeting you over the past 24 hours, I have been impressed by the diversity of competences, of experiences, of resources, of ambition and hope that is gathered here at Play the Game.

If you are ready to share your particular talent with the person sitting next to you, then I am convinced that we will all go back home in a few days a whole lot richer than we came.

As organisers we depend on your help to make this encounter exciting and fruitful for all, and on behalf of everyone involved in the organisation I would like to thank you from the heart for helping us.

We all depend on each other to take the necessary steps to a more transparent, more honest and more democratic sports world. In other words, we welcome you to Play the Game.