

DEATH SENTENCE FOR ASKING ABOUT FOOTBALL MONEY

What did FIFA do to help sports editor, conference asked

by Kirsten Sparre

Only a faded photograph of Zaw Thet Htwe made it to Play the Game – the editor himself was prevented from accepting the invitation from director Jens Sejer Andersen.

He could not attend Play the Game 2005 in person. Nevertheless, the plight of sports editor Zaw Thet Htwe from Myanmar moved delegates so much that they decided to challenge FIFA and ask what the organisation had done to help a man sentenced to death for asking whether a FIFA grant had been used according to its purpose.

The case of Zaw Thet Htwe and the responsibilities of sports organisations was raised by Play the Game's director Jens Sejer Andersen in his opening speech.

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

The Play the Game director had researched the question for days and had not been able to turn up one single declaration of support from the sports world in the public domain.

Questions and answers

The story stayed with the audience and the following day delegates sent a resolution to FIFA with two questions:

- What action did FIFA take in case of the arrest, secret trial and death sentence of Zaw Thet Htwe?
- Has FIFA taken any steps to discover how FIFA grants have been spent in Myanmar since the first payment in 1998?

Answers came the next day. As it turned out, FIFA's president, Sepp Blatter, had tried to intervene on behalf of Zaw Thet Htwe back in January 2004. It happened in a private letter to the president of Myanmar's Football Association, colonel Htike Thuang.

"The FIFA president stressed that he "would be extremely grateful if you [Mr.Thuang] could use all your influence and the spirit of solidarity which exists in the world football family, to intervene in favour of Mr. Zaw Thet Htwe"", FIFA Director of Communications, Markus Siegler, wrote.

With regards to how FIFA had controlled the spending of FIFA grants in Burma, Markus Siegler said that so far no central audit had been done. Instead a local auditor had made a report which was later controlled by KPMG Switzerland. The controls and audits were found to be adequate.

FIFA urged to go public

Play the Game delegates were pleased to learn that FIFA had tried to intervene on behalf of Zaw Thet Htwe.

"But it would probably have been useful if FIFA at some stage had spoken out publicly on this issue in order to step up the public pressure which human rights organisations were already applying the government of Myanmar," director Jens Sejer Andersen wrote in a reply on behalf of the conference.

He reminded FIFA that it is likely there will be more times in the future where sports journalists will be in danger and could use the support of the organisation.

"Within the last 13 months three sports journalists in Greece have been the targets of brutal and near-fatal attacks. And very recently Italian journalists and editors have been threatened when trying to uncover fraud in football," he said.

The conference was not impressed with FIFA's efforts to control how FIFA grants had been spent in Myanmar.

"We are surprised that FIFA puts its trust into a financial report from a local auditing company in a state where military dictators influence football as well as financial affairs and where critical activities could have fatal consequences for all citizens – including auditors," delegates told FIFA.

The case of Zaw Thet Htwe

Spring 2003: Zaw Thet Htwe's magazine 'First Eleven' raises the question of what has happened to a FIFA grant of 4 million US dollars meant to be spent on developing football in Myanmar

July 2003: Zaw Thet Htwe is arrested and charged with high treason. It is widely believed that the soccer articles were an important trigger for his arrest.

November 2003: Zaw Thet Htwe is sentenced to death after a trial without prior police investigation and where only the prosecution could call witnesses

2004: Human rights organisations mount a campaign to free Zaw Thet Htwe with some success. His sentence is reduced to two years in prison.

January 2005: Zaw Thet Htwe is released from prison and today earns a living writing scripts for movies.