Tension between sports mega events and everyday sports violence in Latin America

In the next few years, the world of sports will be focused on Latin America. Brazil will be hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2014 (two thousand fourteen) and the Olympics in 2016 (two thousand sixteen). However, the football experience in the countries of the region is commonly affected by violent practices, which are contrary to the values of fair play, solidarity and honesty promoted by these large sports events.

The massive demonstrations during the Confederations Cup last June and the ongoing claims by civil society organizations highlight that these events are in the midst of strong social tension.

Brazil, host to the next large events, is the biggest winner of FIFA World Cups, holding five titles in its history. However, Brazilians also beat records in the death toll among football fans. Only in 2012 (two thousand twelve), 23 (twenty-three) fans lost their lives for going to a stadium in Brazil, according to a report made by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Up until July this year, 13 (thirteen) “torcidos” (football fans) have died. These figures place Brazil among the countries with the highest number of deaths per year in soccer, together with Argentina and Italy.

In the last years, Brazilian football has witnessed a growth in the so-called “torcidas organizadas”, institutionalized fan groups that support a team. Members pay a monthly fee, trade the club’s merchandising, obtain tickets for matches and organise fund-raising parties and events. Some of them even participate in the famous carnival parades.

But as they grew in relevance and joined new members in, the torcidas also increased their violent practices, including frequent clashes and brawls. Some of their members are bandits holding serious criminal records. The lack of control on the part of law enforcement agencies has worsened the problem, which has already claimed the lives of over 150 (one hundred fifty) fans to the present time.

Only 5 % (five per cent) of the fans attending a match are part of torcidas. But violence goes further than them. According to statistics, 80 % (eighty per cent) of those who died were not part of torcidas and most died outside the stadiums. A study conducted by the University reveals that most of the victims are between 14 (fourteen) and 25 (twenty five) years old and belong to middle or low social classes.

Apart from worrying local authorities, FIFA itself has expressed its concern for security problems in Brazilian football. In December 2012 (two thousand twelve), the final match of the Copa Sudamericana between Brazil’s Sao Paulo and Argentina’s Tigre was abandoned at halftime after the Argentine players were assaulted by armed security guards in the dressing rooms.

After the incidents, FIFA President Joseph Blatter stated, “Such an incident should be a warning for the World Cup organisers. But security is not just a matter of the sports organisation but of the police as well”.

Last January, the nightclub Kiss caught on fire in the city of Santa Maria –to the South of the country- and left a toll of 233 (two hundred thirty three) deaths. FIFA quickly attempted to dissociate this event from the next World Cup. Secretary General Jerome Valcke soon reported to the Brazilian press: “Our thoughts are with the families of the victims of this tragedy. Nonetheless, this event has nothing to do with the security in the stadiums during the 2014 World Cup”. Sources from the Brazilian Olympics Committee also ruled out any relationships with Brazil’s capability to organise massive events. After the tragedy, the launching of the final countdown of 500 (five hundred) days to the beginning of the World Cup was cancelled.

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Another tragedy in Brazilian and South American football was the death of Kevin Beltrán, a 14 (fourteen) year old Bolivian boy. During the encounter between Corinthians and San José de Oruro for the Libertadores Cup last February, the members of the Brazilian torcida “Gavioes da Fiel” decided to celebrate the goal of their team throwing flares at the Bolivian fans, one of which hit Beltrán’s face, causing his death.

Soon after this incident, Blatter made reference to violence once again: “We are not the origin of violence; the origin is in society. In a disturbed world, football brings the excitement and fun people need when things are not going well. Football connects and reunites people”.

Twelve Brazilian fans were arrested after Beltrán’s death, and they served time for five months. Amid criticism from the Brazilian government and Congress for the slow resolution of the case, fans were released on grounds of insufficient evidence. In Brazil, a 17 (seventeen) year-old boy admitted his part in the incident. Corinthians granted Beltrán’s family 50 (fifty) thousand dollars in compensation.

In South America, Argentina also competes against Brazil to beat the record of football World Cups and violence.

Argentine barras bravas (hooligans) are famous worldwide for their passion stimulating their teams and for the incidents they generate. In 2013 (two thousand thirteen) so far, Argentina accounts for 7 (seven) deaths in football violence. Most of them occurred in brawls among fans of the same team. In 2012 (two thousand twelve), there were 12 (twelve) fatal victims, one per month. Overall, the history of Argentine football has claimed the lives of almost 300 (three thousand) people. Less than 10 % (ten per cent) of the perpetrators were punished.

Due to the acts of violence throughout this year, only fans of the local team attend the league’s matches. Today, the master plan of the Association led by FIFA Vice President Julio Grondona is a card called AFA Plus, which is given to each fan attending the stadium for identification purposes. Meanwhile, hooligans will continue their violent practices and the business around them.

The hooligans know how to get organised to participate in important sports events such as World Cups. That is why they will expand their business in order to get the money to travel to Brazil to support Lionel Messi’s team. In 2010 (two thousand ten), members of the ruling coalition favoured the travel of fans to the World Cup in South Africa under the group named Hinchadas Unidas Argentinas (United Argentine Fans).

In view of the World Cup, Argentine hooligans represent a concern for the police. The Brazilian law enforcement agencies are already working jointly with Argentine officials from the Ministry of Security, who pledged to submit a list of the hooligans who hold criminal records.

Uruguay is a country with a long football tradition, which even won the first World Cup in 1930 (nineteen thirty). In recent years, it has also experienced an increase in the number of incidents in the stands.

However, Uruguayan football does not record any major tragedies in its history. The last fan who died is Rodrigo Aguirre, a Peñarol hooligan, who died little more than two years ago. He was shot by hooligans from the rival team after a series of incidents during the previous days.

In January this year, the Homeland Ministry and the Uruguayan Association decided to suspend all football matches for 10 (ten) days, as a consequence of the incidents that took place during an encounter between Nacional and Peñarol.
It was later found that Washington Vega, Peñarol’s head of Security, had given away 50 (fifty) tickets to the leader of the hooligans for a match during the Libertadores Cup. It was also found that the Homeland Ministry had given tickets to members of Peñarol and Nacional hooligans to attend National team’s matches.

In 2008 (two thousand eight), the Homeland and Sports Ministries urged football clubs to deploy a “security support team for sports events”. As a result, the main clubs in the country hired barra bravas leaders to take care of security in the stands. In this way, hooligans gained relevance and power, which they still keep.

In 2014 (two thousand fourteen), Colombia will participate in the World Cup again after 16 (sixteen) years. In that country, football violence is also a concern for authorities.

In the first six months of 2013 (two thousand thirteen), 8 (eight) fans were killed in Colombia in football-related incidents. In other words, one person every 22 (twenty two) days. Last September, 3 (three) more fans lost their lives in football-related brawls in less than a week.

The issue of sports violence was addressed by the Colombian government, which sought to stop incidents by means of various laws. Despite statistics, security was enhanced inside Colombian stadiums to avoid great risks there. The main arenas do not have protection fences, something very rare in South America.

However, most incidents do not take place inside stadiums but in the surroundings or in the roads, where violence and death is common among rival supporters. Nevertheless, the Colombian Football Federation does not consider them sports-related violent incidents and only admits the death of one fan in the last 20 (twenty) years.

Thus, in Colombia, violence does not seem to start on the field but rather end there. Stadiums and their surroundings are just the tip of the iceberg of a broader social problem, mainly involving young people, who continue to die due to violence in various areas of the city and country.

Chile has improved the football performance of its national team in recent years; however, violence rates have also gone up.

In March 2012 (two thousand twelve), the movement “Los de Abajo”-hooligans from Universidad de Chile team- protested on the streets against the “Safe Stadium Plan” fostered by the government to reduce violence in stadiums. The plan forced clubs to take a series of new checks and controls.

The law was finally promoted in early 2012 (two thousand twelve), after the match between Universidad de Chile and Deportes Iquique, where a series of flares and fireworks forced the suspension of the encounter. As a consequence, the Chilean Federation imposed a harsh punishment: Universidad would play one match at its stadium with no audience, and not tickets would be sold in other four matches. That meant a hard blow for the team owners, who would see their profits affected. It was necessary to avoid new suspensions and stop hooligans so that the incident would not recur.

Amid discussions, an opposition Congress Member accused the country’s Sports Deputy Minister, Gabriel Ruiz Tagle, of being the main financer to hooligans. Tagle had been president of Colo Colo and the head of the Association that managed the club. Before that, the main shareholder was Sebastián Piñera, current president of Chile.
The plan has partly decreased violence, but not everybody agrees with it. Tickets to access the stadium are increasingly more expensive; drums and big flags were banned and some specialists claim that the plan only moves violence away from the field, to places where it is not seen, without truly solving the problem.

It seems there is still hard work to do, as shown by the death of a Colo Colo fan in July 2012 (two thousand twelve). In May this year, a fan of Universidad de Chile was stabbed to death after a match.

Mexico is another South American country that has seen big transformations in football in recent years.

Mexican hooligans grew strongly in the mid-nineties, when they got organised and changed to a more active way of supporting their teams, following the example of South American and European fans. Many charged this change on Andrés Fassi, former leader of Pachuca club, who organised a group of youngsters to cheer his team in 1996 (one thousand nine hundred ninety six).

These new hooligan groups spread across most of the Mexican clubs, replacing the old “porras”, groups of men, women and children who faithfully cheered and supported their teams.

According to data from the Mexican Sports Commission of Congress, in the 70s (seventies) and 80s (eighties), 90 % (ninety per cent) of attendees to football events were families. Today, by contrast, violence is responsible for a petty 27 % (twenty-seven) of family attendance.

Mexican football has witnessed growing incidents among rival hooligans and even among members of the same fan clubs, but the sports history in the country still does not report any casualties due to clashes among supporters.

However, one violent incident every four days of the League games was recorded in 2012 (two thousand twelve). The 2013 (two thousand thirteen) tournament started with a wave of incidents in the first days, including brawls among rival fans in at least three matches.

Many fan groups are given game tickets by the club owners, and control the parking lots in the surroundings of the stadiums.

Ecuador reports 5 (five) fans killed in the past 5 (five) years. Two of them died inside the stadiums and other 3 (three) were killed outside.

The problem of violence gathered special significance in November 2012 (two thousand twelve), when George Murillo, a fan of Barcelona in Guayaquil, was shot to death by Emelec hooligans without any prior incident. A few hours later, Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa publicly called against violence in the country’s football practice.

Despite a series of measures taken by the government, little has been done to clarify the deaths of past years. Such was the case of David Erazo, killed in 2009 (two thousand, nine) after a fight among hooligans of Liga de Quito and El Nacional. His mother, Elsa, regularly attends the stadiums where Liga de Quito plays to find the perpetrators of her son’s death. This and other crimes remain unpunished.

In Peru, hooliganism hit the news in 2008 (two thousand eight), when Alianza Lima’s supporters opened fire against Universitario’s fans, leaving a toll of one death and seven wounded.

But the problem burst out in September 2011 (two thousand, eleven) after Walter Oyarce was killed. This 23 (twenty-three) year-old young man attempted to protect two men from rampaging fans of Universitario, as
they clambered from box to box ripping away signs of support for Alianza Lima, the rival team. Oyarce was pushed down from height and died. José Luis Roque Alejos, former bodyguard for Universitario’s president, was one of the accused of the death.

After the incident, the country’s president, Ollanta Humala, ordered first division games to be played without audience. Next, the Football Association announced the suspension of the following match.

Finally, Peruvian clubs strengthened security measures and the police managed to register more than 5,000 (five thousand) fans of different clubs.

Paraguay witnessed the outburst of fatal incidents early this year, when two fans were killed in football violence. Hooligans of Cerro Porteño and Olimpia, the country’s two main clubs, clashed to levels never imaged before.

In January, Olimpia fan Rolando Perez, aged 26 (twenty six), was shot to death by Cerro Porteño thugs amid a violent brawl. A few days later, 16 (sixteen) year-old Alberto Valdez, was stabbed to death in a fight among hooligans from those teams. The victim, a Cerro Porteño fan, first hit an Olimpia fan on the head and was later chased and stabbed.

The above-described incidents are alarming, especially in a continent expected to host the greatest football event in less than a year’s time, where most of the perpetrators of the mentioned incidents are likely to attend while FIFA brandishes the Fair Play flags.

The death and the wounded described here are mere numbers and fall short of summarising the problem, which can by no means be reduced to quantities like goals scored in a football match. However, they serve as adequate indicators to account for the seriousness of this scourge.

Latin American countries seem to be experiencing a repeated pattern of events in relation to violence in sports: growing number of “organised fans”, frequent incidents, deaths, big news in the press, social outrage, campaigns against violence, renewed government plans for toughening punishments against perpetrators, more policemen at stadiums and stronger controls on fans. This process has taken place in almost every country mentioned here.

However, it seems that these repeated measures are not enough to come up with solutions.

I am part of a group of Argentine scientists and researchers who study the scourge of football violence in Argentina. In 2012 (two thousand twelve), after a series of incidents, we disclosed a document containing a number of proposals to advance in the solution to this problem. The ideas stem from the problem in Argentina but may apply -considering nuances- to the various countries in Latin America.

We believe neither “violent people” nor “violence in football” actually exists but rather conditions that trigger violent actions in football events, involving various sectors and resulting from different causes.

In this line, we believe that spectacular proposals, such as great laws, amazing police deployments or mass prohibitions will not solve the crux of the matter so it is vital to address the conditions that promote violence; such conditions give way to reasonable and concrete practices deemed as legitimate by many football fans.

Therefore, it is essential to build ties among the various sectors and work on long-term plans for safe sports events. Greater relevance and power should be given to the so-called “regular fans”, who are not part of hooligan groups, so that they can regulate their practices and be part of security management in stadiums. It
would be a good idea that each country could draft its own football fan bylaws, setting forth the rights and obligations of football fans, as happens in Brazil and Colombia.

Many law enforcement institutions in the continent are unreliable. As a result, they should be left aside from security operations, as has already been the case in some countries, to create groups of unarmed security officers especially trained to act in football events. It would also be convenient to improve the building, hygiene and safety conditions of stadiums and apply clear and fair rules for the punishment of violent acts.

Thousands of football fans willing to enjoy a great sports event will gather in Brazil for the World Cup. Let us hope that the various players work very hard so that sports events and peace are no longer rivals but part of the same team.