Imagine being a sports journalist in a country where the government has issued a decree that sports journalists cannot leave the country. Imagine also that your colleagues are constantly under threat from being shot or detained by the government without trial and that sport in the country is as threatened as sports journalists. That country is Somalia. But even more surprising is that despite the lack of a stable political situation, a number of people have worked hard in recent years to keep sport alive in Somalia by maintaining sports bodies and rebuilding a National Olympic Committee.

Play the Game wanted to highlight this important story at its 2007 conference, and an invitation and a travel grant went out to Shafi ci Mohyaddin Abokar, first vice president and head of international relations of Somalia Sports Press Association, who has worked tirelessly to keep the international community informed about events in Somalia at great risk to his own life.

Over the past few years, Shafi ci has sent e-mail after e-mail to organisations like Play the Game and the International Sports Press Association detailing the ups and downs of sports and sports journalism that have become pawns in the country’s political power games. At the moment, the fortunes of sport are closely linked to the party that holds political power at any given time:

- For six months in 2006, the Islamic Courts Union ruled major parts of the country and declared sport a Satanic act and banned women and children from playing sports. The Union also banned sports broadcasts.
- In 2007, the interim government regained power in the country although Islamists remain a powerful opposition group. Sports are being played again but according to the Somali Sports Press Association, the government as well as the Islamists are wary of sport’s ability to create friendship and peace between members of segregated groups. The parties prefer divisions to remain strong.
- Yet, 17 national sports federations are members of the Somali Olympic Committee that in 2007 opened up five regional offices to assist with programmes to re-introduce sport in Somalia. The programmes are supported by the International Olympic Committee.

Unfortunately, Shafi ci never made it to Iceland. He was unable to leave Somalia due to the government decree that bars sports journalists and athletes from leaving the country without government approval. Should he have been able to leave, he would not have been allowed to enter Iceland that does not issue visas to residents of Somalia.

You can read Shafi ci’s English language reports on sport and sports journalism in Somalia on the website for the National Olympic Committee in Somalia (www.nocsom.org) and on the website for the International Sports Press Association (www.aipsmedia.com).