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World Cup offers chance to tackle racism and intolerance – UN rights chief



7 June 2010 – The soccer World Cup, set to kick off in South Africa later this week, is a perfect opportunity to highlight the need to tackle racism and intolerance on and off the field, says the United Nations human rights chief.

“Let’s kick discrimination off the field. Let’s tackle exclusion. Let’s put racism offside,” High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay stated in an op-ed published in South Africa’s *Business Day*.

Ms. Pillay said the World Cup that kicks off on Friday is an opportune time to reflect on the fact that sport is meant to foster social cohesion, bring different cultures together in a celebration of healthy competition, and to overcome the diffidence and even contempt that all too often divide countries and communities in the political and social arenas.

The choice of South Africa – a country that renounced the institutionalized racism of apartheid – as the host for the event is a perfect opportunity and platform to renew efforts to combat discrimination in all its forms, she noted.

The High Commissioner, who experienced prejudice and racism first hand as a woman of Indian descent growing up in her native South Africa, was the first non-white female judge to sit on the country’s High Court.

“As a victim of racism and a sports fan, I urge all who play or simply watch sport to use the World Cup as a catalyst to call for global action against intolerance and racism,” she stated. “These are scourges that affect countless women, men and children around the world and that must be challenged at every turn.”

She called for guarding against racism and other manifestations of intolerance that poison sport – particularly football – and that undermine its positive message and bring it into disrepute.

This happens all too often, she noted, when the supporters of competing teams use slurs and even violence to vilify and attack their opponents. Even the players have at times been prone to such despicable behaviour, she added.

“National football authorities everywhere must back their strong rhetoric with serious and consistent disincentives. Manifestations of racism or intolerance in or around the stadiums during the World Cup should be swiftly addressed and the perpetrators isolated.

“The clear message of the World Cup must be that there is no place for racism and intolerance in sport,” stated Ms. Pillay.

“Ultimately, the real winners of this year’s World Cup will be those who celebrate and uphold in words and in deeds its values of fair play, honest competition, respect and tolerance both on and off the field.”

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