

Iranian women to attend football match freely for first time in decades

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 01:05

TEHRAN: Thousands of Iranian women fans are to attend a football match freely on Thursday for the first time in decades, after FIFA threatened to suspend the country over its controversial male-only policy.

The Islamic republic has barred female spectators from football and other stadiums for around 40 years, with clerics arguing they must be shielded from the masculine atmosphere and sight of semi-clad men.

World football's governing body FIFA ordered Iran last month to allow women access to stadiums without restriction and in numbers determined by demand for tickets.

The directive came after a fan dubbed "Blue Girl" died after setting herself on fire in fear of being jailed for dressing up as a boy to attend a match.

Women were quick to get their hands on tickets to attend Iran's 2022 World Cup qualifier against Cambodia at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Thursday.

The first batch sold out in less than an hour, and additional seats were also snapped up in short order, state media said.

The Sports Ministry said the 100,000-capacity stadium – whose name means "Freedom" in Farsi – was ready to host even more women.

One of the 3,500 women to have secured a ticket was Raha Poorbakhsh, a football journalist.

"I still can't believe this is going to happen because after all these years of working in this field, watching everything on television, now I can experience everything in person," she told AFP.

But Poorbakhsh said she was aware of many other women without tickets.

There have been rare occasions in recent years when Iranian women have been allowed to watch matches, but this time they were free to buy their own tickets, albeit a set number.

Using the hashtag #WakeUpFifa, women have taken to social media to demand more tickets.

While women have already taken up their entire allocation, only 2,500 men have so far purchased electronic tickets for the more than 70,000 seats available to them, the ISNA news agency reported.

Those lucky enough to attend will be segregated from men and watched over by

150 female police officers.

People on the streets of Tehran said they supported the decision to allow women into stadiums.

"I would like there to be freedom for women, like men, to go freely and even sit side by side without any restrictions, like other countries," said a woman who gave her name only as Hasti.

Nader Fathi, who runs a clothing business, said the presence of women could improve the atmosphere in stadiums.

But he said "they will regret it" if they are exposed to "really bad swear words" and "bad behavior."

The bumpy road Iranian women have traveled in order to gain free access to stadiums has not been without tragedy.

Sahar Khodayari died last month after setting herself ablaze outside a court in fear of being jailed for attending a match.

Dubbed "blue girl" because of the colors of the club she supported – Tehran giants Esteghlal FC – she had reportedly been detained last year when trying to enter a stadium dressed as a boy.

Her death sparked an outcry, with many calling for Iran to be banned and matches boycotted.

The judiciary dismissed reports she had been told she would be jailed, and Khodayari's father said she did not "sacrifice" herself for any cause.

Foreign pressure

Ahead of Qatar 2022, FIFA has pressed Iran to allow women to attend qualifiers.

But Iran denied its decision to allow women into Thursday's match was a result of "foreign pressure."

"The presence of #women in stadiums is due to the internal social demands and government's support of those demands," government spokesman Ali Rabiei tweeted.

The ban on women in stadiums is not written into law or regulations, but it has been strictly enforced.

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, women have only had rare access to stadiums in Iran.

About 20 Irish women attended a World Cup qualifier in 2001, and four years

later a few dozen Iranian women watched the national team take on Bahrain.

In October, as many as 100 “handpicked” Iranian women watched a friendly against Bolivia.

The day after, the prosecutor general warned there would be no repeat, saying it would “lead to sin.”

Then in November, a select group of about 850 women attended a match between Esteghlal’s Tehran rivals, Persepolis FC, and Japan’s Kashima Antlers.

The issue continues to be deeply divisive in Iran.

Reformists have welcomed the latest move, but conservatives have come out strongly against it.

The Donya-e-Eqtasad financial newspaper called it “a step to weaken a taboo and also free Iran’s football of the looming shadow of FIFA’s punishment.”

But the ultra-conservative Kayhan daily said women were more concerned about economic issues.



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Iranian female football fan dies after setting herself on fire
Iranian FA warned new law is putting country’s Asian Cup place at risk

Calm returns to Iraq, as US condemns violence

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 01:07

BAGHDAD: Calm prevailed in Iraq on Wednesday after a week of anti-government protests left dozens dead, prompting the US to call on the country's government to exercise "maximum restraint."

In Baghdad – the second most populous Arab capital – normal life has gradually resumed since Tuesday. Traffic has again clogged the main roads of the sprawling city of 9 million inhabitants. Students have returned to schools, whose reopening was disrupted by the violence.

On Tuesday, security restrictions were lifted around Baghdad's Green Zone, where government offices and embassies are based.

Iraq descended into violence last week as protests that began with demands for an end to rampant corruption and chronic unemployment escalated with calls for a complete overhaul of the political system.

The demonstrations were unprecedented because of their apparent spontaneity and independence in a deeply politicized society.

Protesters were met with tear gas and live fire. On Sunday night scenes of chaos engulfed Sadr City, the Baghdad stronghold of influential Shiite leader Moqtada Al-Sadr, who called for the government to resign.

At least 13 demonstrators died in Sadr City, where the military recognized "excessive force outside the rules of engagement" had been used.

According to official figures, the week of violence in Baghdad and across southern Iraq killed more than 100 people, mostly protesters, with more than 6,000 others wounded.

Uncertainty over the identify of the perpetrators persists, with authorities blaming "unidentified snipers."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned the violence on Tuesday.

During a call with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi, Pompeo said "those who violated human rights should be held accountable," the State Department said in a statement.

"The secretary lamented the tragic loss of life over the past few days and urged the Iraqi government to exercise maximum restraint.

"Pompeo reiterated that peaceful public demonstrations are a fundamental

element of all democracies, and emphasized that there is no place for violence in demonstrations, either by security forces or protesters." While calm has returned to the country, uninterrupted internet access has not.

Cybersecurity NGO NetBlocks blamed the state for imposing "a near-total telecommunication shutdown in most regions, severely limiting press coverage and transparency around the ongoing crisis."

For a week internet access has been progressively limited. First access to certain social media sites disappeared, followed by internet connections for telephones, computers and even virtual private network (VPN) applications.

Since Tuesday, connection has intermittently returned to Baghdad and the south of the country. During these short reconnections, social media sites were accessible via a VPN connection, and images of protesters killed during marches began to be shared.

On Wednesday, the connection remained unreliable. Providers told customers they were unable to provide a timetable for a return to uninterrupted service, information on restrictions, or any other details.

Iraqi authorities have not commented on the restrictions, which according to NetBlocks affected three quarters of the country. In the north, the autonomous Kurdish region is unaffected.

The tentative calm returning to Baghdad comes ahead of Arbaeen, the massive pilgrimage this month that sees millions of Muslims walk to the holy city of Karbala, south of Baghdad.

Nearly 2 million came last year from neighboring Iran, which has urged citizens to delay their travel into Iraq in light of the protest violence.

Its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Monday "enemies" were trying to drive a wedge between Tehran and Baghdad, in an apparent allusion to the protests.

The demonstrations and accompanying violence have created a political crisis in a country torn between its two main allies – Iran and the US.

With political rivals accusing each other of allegiance to foreign powers, President Barham Saleh called on Monday for "sons of the same country" to put an end to the "discord."

He called for a "national, all-encompassing and frank dialogue ... without foreign interference."



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Feared no more: Iraq protesters challenge factions' reign of terror
How political forces fueled the spread of Iraq protests

[Lebanese military veterans protest nonpayment of demobbed soldiers](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-10-10 00:46

BEIRUT: Large numbers of former Lebanese soldiers took to the streets early on Wednesday to demonstrate outside the Ministry of Finance's VAT building in Beirut.

The retired servicemen and women were protesting against the government's austerity measures – including cuts to medical aid and other benefits – and delays to end-of-service payments.

The protesters blocked the entrance to the building – preventing some employees from entering, raised the Lebanese flag, and held Lebanese Army banners with the phrase “Loyal people have died, 0 soldier,” written on them.

Beshara, a retired soldier, carried the battery that regulates his heartbeat and said that he can only survive for a few hours without it, but that he took the risk of joining the demonstration to protest against nonpayment of his medical aid and his children's school tuition fees.

Brig. Gen. Sami El-Rammah, a spokesman for the protesters, said the sit-in was staged to "protest arbitrary measures in paying the dues of retired soldiers, which are their right – as prescribed by the army – not a courtesy.

"The Ministry of Finance deals with pensioners by not paying their pensions and school aid, noting that the funds have already been listed," he continued. "How can it make sense not to pay the salaries of pensioners who were demobilized over 9 months ago? How will these people live without salaries?"

He warned: "If officials continue this injustice, they will be surprised by our reaction."

Retired Brig. Gen. Andre Abu Ma'shar stressed that it was a peaceful demonstration. "There will be no roads blocked nor tires set on fire," he said.

"The Lebanese people as a whole are suffering as the veterans are. The authorities' performance is totally unacceptable."

Retired Brig. Gen. George Nader said, "Our fight not only concerns retirees, but also soldiers on active duty, as huge cuts have been made in their salaries."

One female employee in the ministry tried to use her car to enter the building by force, resulting in a heated argument with protesters.

Later, divisions emerged between the protesters themselves; some wanted to end the sit-in and some wanted to proceed to cut off the busy road between the Palace of Justice and the neighborhood of Ashrafyeh. A few protesters lay down in the middle of that road, but it was quickly reopened.

In a placatory statement, the Ministry of Finance said that it fully understood the motives of retired soldiers as well as retired civil servants.

When the 2019 budget was prepared, pensions were estimated at a total of L.L. 450 billion (\$300 million), however after news emerged of the government's intention to freeze early retirement, a huge number of soldiers and military employees filed for their end-of-service benefits, which resulted in extra expenses of L.L. 540 billion (\$360 million).

This prompted the ministry to demand an amendment to the budget to provide additional credit to the unexpected increase in expenses, it claimed, adding that retirees "will soon receive their payments."

According to the official website of the Lebanese Army Command, there are

56,000 personnel in active service, 54,000 of them in the army, 1,000 in the air force, and 1,000 in the navy.

In 2018, the Lebanese army budget was estimated at \$2.5 billion. However, the 2019 budget introduced major cuts, including items that are considered essential, such as fuel, covert action expenses, hardware, buildings, and more.

In Lebanon the retirement age is 58 for army officers and 52 for soldiers and regular army personnel. The low retirement age is considered necessary because of the physical and mental demands of their jobs, and the need to recruit young soldiers.

Lebanon is facing a mounting economic crisis due to a sharp decline in investments and income, an equally sharp increase in bankruptcy and unemployment, accusations of rampant corruption, and increasing uncertainty about the country's future.



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Lebanon's Hussein Bazaza fuses storytelling, fashion design
Major exercise tests Lebanon's response to chemical attack

Morocco reshuffles cabinet, keeps foreign and finance ministers

Author:

Reuters

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1570651538797964500

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RABAT: Morocco announced a cabinet reshuffle on Wednesday, reducing the number of jobs to 23 but keeping the foreign, finance and interior ministers in their posts.

King Mohammed VI approved the list of new ministers submitted by Prime Minister Saad Dine El Otmani, state news agency MAP reported, after having asked him in the summer to arrange a reshuffle.

The tourism, housing, youth and culture, employment, justice and health ministers were changed, but the interior, religious affairs, agriculture, energy, trade and industry and education ministers stayed in place.

El Otmani's moderate Islamist PJD party has seven cabinet posts in the newly configured government, while the liberal RNI led by business tycoon Aziz Akhannouch has four, including his own appointment to agriculture.

The socialist PPS party withdrew last week from the coalition over what it described as political disagreements.

Many of the new ministers are technocrats without clear party affiliation, a development that some analysts say shows the influence of the palace in appointing strategic portfolios, while political parties are marginalized.

"In the constitution, Morocco is a constitutional monarchy, but in reality it is close to an executive monarchy," said Mohamed Masbah of the Independent Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA).

Morocco is seeking a new development model to fight poverty and curb regional and social disparities.

The north African country has largely been insulated from the turmoil that hit North Africa and the Middle East since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, although it regularly sees protests over economic and social problems.



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In Morocco, heroin addiction sweeps cannabis corridor

[Qatar's Al-Ghufran expulsions termed 'breach of human rights'](#)

Wed, 2019-10-09 01:26

JEDDAH: Qatar's regime is inhumanely targeting the Al-Ghufran clan, a member of the larger Al-Murra tribe, for its failure to support a coup staged by the current ruler's father more than two decades ago, a leading human rights and civil liberties lawyer has told Arab News. UK-based lawyer Amjad Salfiti said that serious breaches of human rights are taking place in Qatar despite promises that things would change under the new ruler.

"The state of Qatar is not run by the new ruler but by an old guard, representatives of the father, which is still keen on punishing people using decisions that do not comply with the constitution of Qatar," he said. Human rights violations carried out by the former emir include unfairly

depriving thousands of people of citizenship rights.

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, father of current Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, “decided that they should be deprived of their nationality, and he tried to kick them out and exclude them from their home on the border between Qatar and Saudi Arabia,” Salfiti said. More than 10,000 people have been targeted by the regime.

“The first round of expulsions or deprivations was reported to be 5,000. But that is a conservative estimate,” he said.

“If you are referring just to this part of the tribe, to the Al-Ghufran clan, it is probable that the numbers are just over 10,000. They have all been subjected to draconian measures,” he said.

Asked whether there were legal grounds to justify revoking the citizenship of women and children and deporting them without any crime having been committed, Salfiti said that all citizens – young, elderly, male and female – are covered by international law, and their rights to citizenship should be protected.

“As soon as a state takes any action to deprive a person of his nationality, whether as a group or individually, that would be a contravention of international human rights and international rights in general,” Salfiti said.

In the case of Qatar, a collective form of deprivation that attracts what is commonly referred to as collective punishment is also prohibited under international law.

“An offense has been committed by the state against its own citizens. There would be some sort of recourse by these citizens to judicial forums, whether international, regional or local,” he said. Salfiti said that depriving a person of their nationality and leaving them stateless runs contrary to international conventions.



Sheikh Talib bin Mohammed bin Lahoum bin Sherim Al-Murra, head of the Al-Murra tribe, was expelled from Qatar and now lives in Saudi Arabia.

"States ought not to create states of statelessness, they ought to reduce any state of statelessness," he said. "So Qatar claiming to be a reformist and proactive regarding international law is contradicting itself in committing a serious crime. "It is not only denying people access to education, hospitalization and medical care, but also uprooting people and declaring them stateless, which is a fundamental crime that the international community is working extremely hard to stop."

Salfiti told Arab News that he had worked to help free a prominent Qatari prisoner jailed for seven years by the former emir.

"That prisoner took issue with certain electoral matters, which he believed were in breach of the constitution. He was imprisoned for seven years without trial," Salfiti said.

The lawyer managed to win the prisoner's release by lobbying on his behalf and preparing a summons to the Qatari government seeking his freedom.

Drewery Dyke, chairman of the UK-based Rights Realization Center (RRC) and a senior researcher specializing in international advocacy relating to human rights in GCC countries, Iran and Afghanistan, told Arab News that the Al-Murra tribe is one of the principal clans of Qatar. Members of the tribe also live in other Gulf countries.

"The Al-Murra tribe is found mainly in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. There is a small number in the UAE and some members also are found in Kuwait," he said.

"So they are found throughout the Gulf. A subset of the tribe, the Al-Ghufran clan is found principally in Qatar.

"Some Al-Ghufran activists have claimed that their clan numbers up to 10,000. Certainly, when the deprivation of citizenship process started in October, 2004, the numbers were precise – it was 927 heads of households. Therefore, all the dependants of those heads of households were also made stateless." Numbers at the time ranged up to 5,000. So, with the passage of time and given the natural growth of those communities, today's figure could be as high as 10,000, Dyke said.

"The Qatar government has told the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) that there are 1,500 stateless people in Qatar now," he said.

"Whether that includes this community is unknown. It's difficult to gain a reliable figure on the numbers of the Al-Ghufran clan who have been left stateless to this day."

Human Rights Watch has accused the Qatari regime of depriving individuals of their basic human rights. Dyke said that the "arbitrary" deprivation of citizenship was a contravention of accepted human rights practice. "It happened at a time, 2004, when knowledge about this particular issue and about Qatar was relatively poor. In recent years, members of the community, many based in Saudi Arabia, have started campaigning for their rights," he said.

"In 2004, there was an arbitrary deprivation of citizenship by decree and, shortly afterwards, the authorities began removing people from their jobs. They were deprived of education, people were taken out of schools, they were no longer able to access medical services, had their bank accounts closed and were no longer allowed to own property," Dyke recalls.

Dyke said that a special UN meeting held in Geneva on Oct. 7, 2019, was intended to investigate measures to end statelessness.

"The RRC, other human rights groups and members of Al-Ghufran community are calling on Qatar to allow all those people who were arbitrarily and unfairly

denationalized to be allowed back into the country and renationalized. We also want some kind of restitution and recognition of what they have been through,” he said.

“Members of the tribe have petitioned leading authorities and government figures in the Gulf, including the government of Saudi Arabia.”

However, Dyke said that “unfortunately, the trajectory seems to be pretty negative at the moment.” Doha has signed up to a number of human rights covenants and international human rights treaties, “so it is a good time for Qatar to take action and acknowledge the wrongs that have been committed,” he said.

Dyke highlighted some of the human-rights violations by the Qatari regime. “A travel ban was imposed on Najeeb Al-Nuami, the longstanding human rights lawyer who used to be attorney general. He is still facing restrictions, an arbitrarily imposed travel ban.

“A Qatari poet was imprisoned a few years ago. He was subsequently released and then left the country. “There is a considerable range of human rights challenges that Qatar needs to face.” Dyke said that the head of the Al-Murra tribe, Sheikh Talib bin Mohammed bin Lahoum bin Sherim Al-Murra, is now based in Saudi Arabia following his expulsion from Qatar last year. Al-Murra and 54 members of his family fled to the Kingdom after being stripped of their citizenship.

“I was struck by a statement that he made at the time. He said that his citizenship will return for him, his family and that of the Al-Ghufran members, whether the emir of Qatar likes it or not. It was a clear desire to be restored with his nation,” Dyke said.



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“The Unforgiven”: Qatar’s Al-Ghufran tribe members tell of loss and deportation
“The Unforgiven”: Qatar’s Al-Ghufran tribe fights for justice – and right to citizenship
“The Unforgiven”: Arab News investigates the plight of Qatar’s Al-Ghufran tribe
“The Unforgiven”: Al-Ghufran families ‘arbitrarily stripped of Qatari citizenship,’ HRW says