

South African football stampede kills 43

Barry Mason
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Forty-three people died and around 250 were injured at the Ellis Park football stadium in Johannesburg on the night of Wednesday April 11, as people poured into a stadium that was already full to over capacity. Twenty-nine people died inside the stadium and a further 14 died outside. Nine of the injured remain on the critical list.

The youngest victim was 11-year-old Rosswinn Nation. He had been at the match with his father Roy but became separated from him. Roy Nation queued at the Johannesburg mortuary before dawn on Thursday to identify his son's body.

Thirteen-year-old Sphiwe Mpungose was also killed in the crush. A security guard described how he saw a young girl's neck broken as she was pressed between the steel bars of a security gate. BBC correspondent Milton Nkosi described how he "had to walk on other people in order to save my life."

The tragedy took place at a match between two popular Sowetan teams, the Kaizer Chiefs and the Orlando Pirates. These teams always attract large crowds.

The stadium has a capacity of 60,000 but eyewitnesses said there were many thousands more inside the ground. A police spokesman put the figure at 120,000. In addition, as many as 60,000 people were still outside the stadium as the match started. Most of the deaths occurred when the waiting crowd rushed the gate.

This is not the first time that such a tragedy has happened at a South African football ground. In 1991, 42 people were killed at Orkney during another match between the Pirates and the Chiefs.

The chaos at the ground is in part attributable to the fact that the clubs refuse to sell tickets in advance because the ticket agencies would keep a share of the price. To boost revenue they allow too many people into the grounds. The result is that even in modern

stadiums there is a free for all.

Fans interviewed after the tragedy condemned the clubs' attitude to safety. Joseph Mtsweni said, "They don't count the seats of the stadium, they allow the security to let people inside. When the stadium is full they don't worry."

Victor Motemele said, "I am very angry that this has happened. The organisers are more interested in tickets than safety."

ANC government ministers have been quick to heap the entire blame on to the clubs and the football officials. Nconde Balfour, sports minister, declared, "Those South Africans who died there [would] not have died if proper arrangements had been put in place in anticipation of the game." But the police were responsible for the safety of the crowd outside the stadium. They did nothing to alleviate the crush and failed to ensure that ambulances got through to the injured. Eyewitnesses suggest that the police may have played a direct part in the tragedy in triggering the stampede by firing tear gas into the crowd.

In their desire to make money at any cost, the football clubs are only following the example of the ANC government, which has embarked on a privatisation programme for the benefit of big business while ministers and leading officials have enriched themselves as members of company boards.

The government's main concern is that the tragedy should not harm South Africa's chances of hosting the World Cup in 2010. Balfour told the press, "People have to look at it from a global perspective. As much as we don't want this type of thing to happen, it has happened before in other countries and it has not affected their chances of hosting any major international tournaments. As much as we like to minimize such events as happened last night...I don't think it should be seen as a negative toward the bid for 2010."

By bringing the World Cup to South Africa the ANC government hopes to enhance its standing with its supporters in the black townships where football is a passion. More importantly, the World Cup would significantly boost tourism and inward investment to the country.

While it is willing to exploit popular enthusiasm for football the government has done nothing to improve crowd safety. The fact that 42 people could die at a football match in 1991 under apartheid and the tragedy be repeated in 2001 under the ANC encapsulates the way in which the government has perpetuated the old social inequalities. It is highly unlikely that a similar tragedy could have occurred at a cricket or rugby ground, which are the sports of the elite.



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