

One hundred and thirty people die in Ghana football disaster

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One hundred and thirty people died in a stampede at a football match in Accra, Ghana, on Wednesday, in Africa's worst sporting disaster. After the home team Accra Hearts of Oak scored two late goals to beat Asante Kotoko 2-1, witnesses say some of the Kotoko fans began destroying plastic seats at the Accra Sports Stadium and throwing them on to the running track surrounding the pitch. In response the police began firing tear gas into the crowd and some fans were said to have retaliated with bottles. Many fans said the police had caused the stampede at the 40,000 capacity stadium by firing large amounts of the gas. As the gas spread, panic ensued and the fans scrambled for the exits, which were locked shut, causing many to be suffocated and crushed to death. Police ignored appeals from football fans to cease firing the tear gas.

Since the disaster happened so close to the end of the match, the ambulance men and Red Cross officials had already left. The dead bodies had to be sorted out by a squad of volunteers and taken to local hospitals in private cars as well as in ambulances. Some reports speak of hospital corridors crowded with dead and wounded, along with relatives frantically searching for loved ones. "I personally counted over 100 dead in one of the hospitals," said Komla Dumor, a presenter on a local radio station. Distraught relatives have been travelling to the scene of the disaster and to local hospitals to find their loved ones.

Ghana's President John Kufuor has called an emergency cabinet meeting, and a national state of mourning is expected to be declared. Government spokeswoman Elisabeth Ohene said, "It looks like the police may have overreacted, but a committee of enquiry will be set up."

The Accra disaster was the fourth incident of its kind in Africa in less than a month. It follows a near-disaster

at Accra's national stadium last December, when crowds panicked, fleeing fumes of tear gas fired during the African Champions League final. All that happened in the wake of that near-tragedy was a fine for Ghana's Football Association and a ban for the home club, Hearts of Oak. Nothing was done to improve safety at football matches.

In all, nearly 200 spectators have been killed at football matches in Africa over last 12 months.

On April 11, 43 football fans died and 250 were injured at the Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg during a local league derby between rivals Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates. People were crushed to death when crowds continued to pour into the stadium, which was already packed to capacity.

A total of 14 people died and 51 were injured on April 29 during a match at Lubumbashi, in the south east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, when violence broke out in the league game between TP Mazembe and Lupopo. Again police had fired off tear gas, causing spectators to rush onto the pitch. Both gates of the stadium, which contained at least 30,000 people, were barred shut, causing delays in evacuation. A witness said that a metal barrier separating the main part of the stadium from an annexe collapsed under the pressure of people trying to get out.

On May 6, in the Ivory Coast, incidents between supporters and police led to one death and 39 injuries at the Houphouet-Boigny stadium in Abidjan. Supporters of the top two clubs in the Ivory Coast, Asec Mimosa and Africa Sports, both based in the main commercial capital, Abidjan, clashed violently during a local league derby.

In July last year, 13 people were killed in a stampede when police deliberately fired tear gas into the near-capacity 60,000 crowd in Harare stadium during the

World Cup qualifier between Zimbabwe and South Africa. Zimbabwean and South African players had to lay face down on the pitch and were treated by medical personnel, while a cloud of teargas hung over one stand in the bowl-shaped stadium. Officials at the ground were outraged by the police action, claiming their response was a "total over-reaction". An inquest into the tragedy found the police action to blame for the 13 deaths, but there have been no prosecutions of suspended police officers.

On top of these incidents, there have also been serious riots at football stadiums in Algeria, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa in the last year, where deaths have only been narrowly averted. Much of the African media say such disasters result from the rapid increase in football's popularity in Africa, which has grown much faster than the development of modern facilities.

It is certainly true that most of the stadiums in Africa lack proper facilities and staff. But it is also common practice for police to indiscriminately fire tear gas to quell rioting supporters, under conditions where stewarding and safety measures are almost non-existent and exits from the grounds are often blocked. Such oppressive methods reflect the policing approach to working people taken by most African regimes.

Moreover, the provision of sports facilities are hardly a priority in countries that are amongst the most heavily indebted in the world and where IMF structural adjustment programmes dictate minimal social spending.

The role of the football clubs has also been a factor in most of the disasters. Top league matches attract record numbers of fans but even so, tickets are usually sold on the day of the game. This encourages over-selling and in some cases, sales of fake tickets, which leads to the problem of over-capacity. In a climate where profiteering is encouraged, improving the safety and suitability of grounds takes a low priority.



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