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European Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sport Events and in particular at Football Matches (T-RV)

Compliance with commitments project

Report of the advisory visit to Azerbaijan on the implementation of the Convention

6-8 June 2001

The team comprised:

Mr John de Quidt, Chair of the Standing Committee

Mr Radim Bures, Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee

Mr Mesut Özyavuz, Secretary to the Standing Committee

Introduction and overview

The consultative visit was well organised, efficiently managed, and had clear objectives. This enabled the team to identify and focus on the key issues. This report addresses these thematically, with reference to particular meetings and visits, a full list of which is attached.

At the opening meeting on 7 June, the Minister for Youth, Sport and Tourism set the context for the visit. He explained the recent history and economic position of Azerbaijan. Sporting success was a great source of pride to a newly-independent country. The government was committed to meeting its international obligations, to playing a full role in international sport and to bringing its facilities up to international standards. It had passed legislation on sport in 1998.

The provisions of the European Convention on Spectator Violence have the force of law in Azerbaijan. A high level Commission, chaired at ministerial level, ensures the overall co-ordination of the measures required to comply with the Convention. All important parties are represented on the Commission.

The authorities also work closely with fan clubs. There is no history of spectator disorder at stadia and very little record of any incidents outside. Tackling spectator violence is not therefore a high priority. This may need to change if supporters from other countries begin visiting Azerbaijan in any number. It would be advisable for the Government to monitor any incidents so as to be able to respond to any increase.

Allocation of responsibility

The team was informed that operational plans are prepared each year for all major (mainly international) matches. On the basis of an oral agreement with the Minister of the Interior and the Mayor of Baku, the Minister personally oversees the arrangements for international matches at the National Stadium. He convenes a meeting of all the relevant parties in advance of the match to ensure that all the facilities are in order and that each party understands its role.

Responsibility for the stadium is divided between the national government, the stadium management, the Football Association and the police. The national government is responsible for the refurbishment and upgrading of the National Stadium (to provide an eventual capacity of 40,000) and pays for its upkeep. The stadium management ensures that all the facilities (including the power and water supplies) are fully operational and is responsible for opening the gates. The police are responsible for crowd control and the maintenance of public order.

The Football Association is nominally in charge of the match arrangements, in that it determines when and where the match shall take place, rents the stadium and issues the tickets. However, it then hands over all responsibility for spectators to the other parties, in particular the police.

At its meeting with representatives of the Football Association on 8 June, the team was disappointed that these appeared to regard the condition of the structure and facilities of the stadium as the main issue. They did not appear to have an understanding of the principles of safety, crowd control or spectator management, nor of the need for an integrated multi-agency approach.

The team was also concerned by the obviously very poor relationship between the Government and the Football Association. Indeed the Football Association appeared to regard itself (and by extension professional football as a whole) as answerable only to FIFA and UEFA and not to the law of the country. It did not present any arguments to justify this position.

While the Football Association could legitimately argue that its membership, internal procedures and many aspects of its oversight of football are private matters, it is difficult to see why it should be exempt from the normal requirements of company law that would apply to the equivalent associations in other countries.

The breakdown in relationships and the non-engagement of the Football Association on match days would appear to militate against the effective co-ordination necessary to prevent either potential disorder or safety failures. The team recommends that the Government should address this issue as a matter of priority.

It is for the Azerbaijani Government to determine how responsibilities should be allocated between different bodies, having regard to local needs and circumstances. However, the team recommends that the authorities that are responsible for public order and / or safety should have the power to veto the place, time, and ticketing arrangements of major matches. The allocation of responsibilities should be clearly recorded in writing and, if possible, be backed by the force of law.

Policing and crowd control

The team benefited from discussions with the Deputy Commander of the Baku Police and one of his colleagues on 7 June. It also observed the police in action at the match against Slovakia in the National Stadium on the previous evening. The police participate fully in the preparatory meetings for major matches referred to above. They play a similar role at district level for local lower profile

matches. Discussions with representatives of the stadia and clubs in Baku and in Sumgayit confirmed that co-operation with the police works well.

The police preparation for a match is rigorous with detailed briefing and debriefing. At present, the police do not rely on gathering intelligence. Hitherto, there appears to have been no need for this. Nevertheless, the police will need to establish links with their counterparts in other countries from which significant numbers of supporters are likely to travel to Azerbaijan. Sufficient powers already exist to punish any incidents under either the criminal or the administrative law.

Whatever the theory, in practice the police were in full control at the stadium during the match against Slovakia. Some 2,000 police and 500 interior ministry troops were present for a crowd of about 10,000. It is understood that only about 100 police would attend for domestic matches. Police with full riot gear were present but remained out of sight in buses in order to keep the atmosphere relaxed. They did not need to intervene.

The crowd was exuberant and noisy but well behaved. This may have been partly because Azerbaijan scored its largest ever victory in an international football match since independence. Some spectators stood in their places after the first Azerbaijan goal. The number increased significantly after the second goal. The police were prepared to allow this provided that spectators did not attempt to leave their places.

The team was informed that spectators sit in their allocated place, save in one popular area where the seats are unreserved. It had no means of checking this though it observed that spectators tended not to sit towards the front. This did not pose any problem on this occasion because the stadium was less than half full. However, the authorities will need to focus on this issue should crowds start rising towards the full capacity of the stadium.

The police role was not limited to crowd control and the maintenance of order. They also undertook many of the safety and customer care functions that would be performed by stewards in other countries. In doing so, they acted very professionally. In particular they succeeded in keeping all the staircases, gangways and passageways clear of spectators. Spectators were directed towards the correct seating area.

Nevertheless, the cost of deploying so many police officers on such tasks must be very high. It would be sensible for the Government, in consultation with the police and other relevant authorities, to review whether, and, if so, to what extent, some of these tasks could in due course be performed by suitably trained stewards. Moreover, it might be appropriate for at least some part of this cost to be met out of the gate or television receipts, in particular where the stadium is not owned by the state or city authorities.

Ticketing and entry control

Some progress has been made towards using volunteer "stewards" to check tickets and control the entry of spectators. However, the role of these persons relative to that of the police was unclear. They did not give the impression of being either well trained or fully motivated. It would be advisable to rectify these weaknesses as part of the review of the division of responsibilities referred to above.

The team spent a considerable time observing the system of entry control in the half hour before kick off. This consists of an outer cordon of police officers to check tickets and to deter numerous children who were attempting to enter without tickets. A further cordon of police and "stewards" at the stadium gates performs a similar function. A further ticket check is conducted at the entrance to

the stadium building itself. These checks were not particularly thorough and the team observed a number of spectators passing through without showing any ticket. In some cases this appeared to be with the connivance of those checking the tickets.

The Football Association reported that it had sold 6,000 tickets and issued a further 1,000 complimentary tickets. It recognised that other spectators would have entered without tickets but did not seem unduly concerned. Nor did it consider it had any responsibility in this matter.

While the entry of spectators without tickets did not cause any problems on this occasion, because of the low overall attendance, it could present serious hazards if the stadium (or in particular the section made available to visiting supporters) was sold out. As mentioned above, the ticketing arrangements should not operate in isolation from the management of the crowd at the stadium.

A further problem occurred around the entrances into the stadium building itself. Spectators did not queue but pushed forward in a dense mass onto and up a short flight of steps. Children in particular were jostled and pushed. It would not take much for spectators to be crushed and injured.

The team recommends that the Government should review the design and management of the entrances to this stadium to prevent such an incident from occurring. In the absence of a queuing culture, this could perhaps be achieved by a combination of barriers to channel spectators into single file and the more systematic deployment of police or stewards. (Any barriers would need to be removed once spectators had been admitted so as to avoid any obstruction on exit.)

The tickets themselves appeared to be of poor quality and easy to forge. They were also relatively expensive having regard to the cost of living in Azerbaijan. The team was unable to ascertain whether this was a factor in the low attendance. If so, there might be merit in a review of ticketing arrangements and ticket prices as a means of increasing overall attendances and encouraging other groups to attend.

Stadia design and fittings

The team was originally due to visit three stadia. A fourth visit to the SAFA Stadium in Baku was added at the insistence of the Football Association.

The National Stadium in Baku has already undergone considerable renovation with more to come. Individual numbered fixed seats with backs have been installed in much of the stadium. These are comfortable and have good leg room. Although there is a running track between the spectators and the pitch, the view is excellent from every seat. The team was pleased to observe that there is no perimeter fence. Spectators are deterred from going onto the pitch by a large number of interior ministry troops who occupy alternate seats in the front row.

The radial gangways, which run down from a broad rear walkway, provide good circulation routes, though the gangways are somewhat steep at the top, where they might benefit from central handrails. There appear to be sufficient entrances and exits. It was encouraging to see that these were kept unlocked and were staffed at all times during the match. In an emergency, spectators could escape onto the pitch through gates at the foot of each gangway.

Although it has no roof, the stadium was in a generally good state of repair. However, like all the stadia examined, it had only limited toilet facilities and little if any provision for spectators with disabilities (such as war veterans).

The Central Stadium in Sumgayit is in a poor state of repair but could be upgraded to an acceptable standard. This will, however require considerable expenditure. The team was informed that work is due to start on a phased refurbishment programme in late 2001 or early 2002. In the first instance the rotting wooden benches will be replaced by some 12,000 individual seats. The team suggests that the responsible authorities draw up a detailed programme, having regard to the comments in the following paragraphs, to be implemented as resources permit.

All spectators would enjoy good legroom and a good view of the pitch, despite the running track, were it not for the perimeter fence. This is in poor condition and easy to break through. It is difficult to see what purpose it now serves. It is suggested that consideration be given to its removal, subject to the provision of adequate crowd control measures, as set out in the Standing Committee's Recommendation on perimeter fences.

The gangways and circulation routes are good, though some of the barriers at the rear are in dangerous condition and require urgent attention. Moreover, spectators need to travel considerable distances along either the front or rear walkways to one of the two exits. Consideration should be given to remodelling these because the gates open inwards. In addition, the authorities might wish to examine whether additional exits could be provided for use in an emergency.

The State Oil Company Stadium in Surahani is currently being renovated to provide a total of 2,000 individual seats on one side. This involves a new concrete deck being laid on an existing steel frame. The team noted that considerable thought has been given to access and egress while maintaining the integrity of the existing design.

The SAFA (Football Association) Stadium has been built only recently, to comply with the requirements of FIFA and UEFA. It provides 8,000 individual seats all under cover on three sides. Entry will be through turnstiles. The stands are parallel to and close to the pitch. There is no perimeter fence. Instead the front of each stand is raised up some 1.5 metres with no emergency exits on to the pitch.

The stadium is visually attractive and the building work has been carried out to a high standard. The team has no doubt that the facilities for players, officials, VIPs and the media fully conform to FIFA / UEFA standards. However, the team was disappointed to observe that the stadium appears to have been constructed with little understanding of crowd dynamics and without reference to either the public authorities, the police or those who will be responsible for its operation. What might otherwise be an excellent stadium suffers from a number of design flaws that could have adverse consequences for spectator control and safety.

For example, in two of the three stands, spectators have to travel considerable distances to the nearest exit (up to 60 metres in some cases). The vomitories contain potential choke points. Many of the gangways are narrower than would be permitted in other countries. The barriers at the foot of the gangways are only 80cm high.

In the absence of any pitch markings, it was impossible to determine the viewing standards. However, since the stand is both raised and split by a mid-level lateral gangway, it is quite possible that some spectators, in particular in the rear section, will have their view restricted by those in front of them as well as by the roof pillars

Some of these matters could be overcome without much difficulty. Others might prove more difficult. In the absence of such improvements, the combination of these factors may mean that the safe capacity of this stadium should be set at a figure some way below 8,000. If the necessary powers do not already exist, the Government would be well advised to enact the necessary

legislation empowering either the national or local authorities, in consultation with the police and fire service, to determine and enforce a safe maximum capacity for this and all other stadia in Azerbaijan.

Although some of the stadia have accommodation from which the police commander may observe and supervise events, none of them have control rooms with dedicated communication systems or CCTV. The police rely upon their own radio communications. The stadium manager at the National Stadium carries an ordinary mobile telephone. Facilities of varying quality are provided for the public address announcer and the media.

In the longer term, when resources permit, the Government may wish to consider providing a dedicated control room with its own communications and CCTV to a standard sufficient to ensure spectator safety and control. While such facilities can contribute considerably to the effectiveness of the police and stadium management's operations, it is nevertheless more important to begin by establishing the coherent co-ordination and procedures referred to above.

The team also visited the new facilities built by the National Olympic Committee. It briefly examined a sports hall being used for an international basketball match against Bulgaria. Every effort had clearly been made to build these to a high standard. The Government and National Olympic Committee were very proud of the number of international championships being attracted to Azerbaijan.

Education and young people

The team was informed that sports clubs have begun setting up fans clubs. Three fans clubs have already been registered at the Ministry of Justice. In the stadia, the public address system is used to communicate with the spectators.

At the national level, the state owned television covers the behaviour of spectators in the programmes devoted to sport, in particular football. The Ministry of Sports supports the development of sport in schools not only to provide a breeding ground for the national teams but also as a tool for promoting the Olympic ideal of fair play among children.

The team explained at various meetings, in particular during the seminar towards the end of the visit, the approach of the Council of Europe to sport and its social role as a part of the wider national culture.

The creation of fans clubs is a very good start especially as these are targeted mainly at children and young people. This work should now be extended as part of a more integrated educational and social approach. If possible, this should involve the national and local authorities, the Football Association, the clubs and the schools working in partnership. Specific measures could include the nomination within each club of a specific person who will be responsible for relations with spectators and for educational issues and the organisation of fair play campaign based upon the Council of Europe's Code of Sports Ethics.

Special attention should be given to children and young people in the refugee camps. Clubs, fans clubs and schools should develop local partnerships to this end. This policy should also promote greater interest and participation in sport by girls. One option might be to provide girls and young people from refugee camps with cheaper or even free tickets to football matches.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Council of Europe team:

- notes with pleasure the commitment of the Government of Azerbaijan to providing good quality, safe and well managed sporting facilities to international standards and commends it for the progress that it has already made towards full implementation of the Convention;
- suggests that the Government sets in place procedures for identifying and reporting any incidents; should the number of these increase, it should establish a formal monitoring system;
- recommends that the Government takes steps to ensure that the division of responsibilities is clearly recorded in writing and that, where possible, this is enshrined in legislation;
- recommends that the Government, having consulted FIFA and UEFA, identifies how to improve its relationship with the Azerbaijani Football Association and professional football clubs and to bring them within the remit of the national law without interfering with what are legitimately private matters;
- suggests that the Government, in consultation with the police and other authorities, reviews whether, and, if so, to what extent, some of these tasks could in due course be performed by suitably trained stewards;
- recommends that the Government considers recovering some of the cost of providing police inside stadia from the ticket or television receipts for the match;
- recommends that the Government reviews the design and management of the entrances to the National Stadium;
- suggests that any proposals to increase the number of spectators attending matches and encouraging other groups to attend should include a review of ticket prices;
- welcomes the upgrading already carried out at the National Stadium and the National Oil Company Stadium in Surahani and the further improvements planned at these two stadia and at the Central Stadium in Sumgayit; in the latter case, the responsible authorities should identify priorities and draw up a detailed programme of work to be undertaken as resources permit;
- recommends that, if the necessary powers do not already exist, the Government should enact appropriate legislation to empower either the national or local authorities, in consultation with the police and fire service, to determine and enforce a safe maximum capacity for all stadia in Azerbaijan;
- commends the Government, National Olympic Committee and other bodies for their efforts in promoting sport at all levels;
- welcomes the setting up of fans clubs and advocates the development of further initiatives, in particular in football, as part of an integrated policy for promoting social inclusion, education, and the development of voluntary work; wherever possible this work should be promoted by the state and local authorities, the Football Association, the clubs and the schools in partnership.

Appendix

Programme of the visit

5 June 2001 – Tuesday

Arrival in Baku

6 June 2001 – Wednesday

- Visit to monument of victims for independence
- Meeting with the Minister of Youth, Sports and Tourism
- Inspection of the Republican Stadium named after Tofiq Bahramov
- Inspection of the Olympic Sports Complex
- Further inspection of the Republican Stadium named after Tofiq Bahramov
- 2002-World Cup qualification round Azerbaijan - Slovakia

7 June 2001 – Thursday

- Meeting at the Head Police Office of Baku
- Meeting at the AFFA (National Football Federation) and inspection of the SAFA Stadium
- Inspection of the Sumgayit stadium named after M. Huseynzade (30 km. from Baku)
- Inspection of the sports arenas of the "Neftchi" sports-health center (Sports center of the State Oil Company)

8 June 2001 – Friday

- Seminar with the participation of the sports specialists, experts, representatives of the sports clubs, stadiums and sports arenas
- Press-conference (meeting with representatives of the mass media)
- Debriefing meeting with the First Vice-Minister and other high level officials

9 June – Saturday

Departure