

# ***Soccer Fans Fear Being Targets of U.S. Immigration Raids***

The Trump administration's policies may have contributed to lower ticket sales for a Club World Cup tournament starting next week.

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Mehdi Taremi, an Iranian soccer player, posing with fans after Iran defeated Qatar in a World Cup qualifier on Thursday. Iran, the first team from Asia to qualify for the World Cup, is on a list of 12 countries that President Trump banned from travel to the United States.

Credit...

Karim Jaafar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



By [Tariq Panja](#)

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Manny Mizael swapped Brazil for Boston 27 years ago, but his passion for a soccer team based nearly 5,000 miles away in Rio de Janeiro burns as bright as ever.

So much so that Mizael helps run a supporters club based in Massachusetts for the team, Flamengo, one of Brazil's most popular. His group regularly hosts match screenings that draw hundreds of fans.

But this year, fan WhatsApp groups began lighting up with chatter about the Trump administration's immigration crackdown almost as much as about Flamengo's latest successes. Fears were so high that the group scrapped a watch party in February, Mizael said, out of concerns that it could become a target for an immigration raid. Many of the fans are from outside the United States and lack legal status.

"People are being snatched off the streets and getting arrested," Mizael said. "We decided not to do the game because we thought it could ruin the lives of many people."

The cancellation was a preview of how President Trump's immigration policies are shaping up to affect next year's World Cup, the most-watched event in sports. It is expected to draw about 6.5 million people, mostly to the United States, where most matches will be played. (Canada and Mexico are co-hosting the tournament.) Fans routinely [go all out](#) for once-in-a-lifetime trips to the World Cup, drawing down years of savings or putting off major purchases like homes to pay for travel.

Image



Players on Flamengo, one of Brazil's most popular soccer teams, celebrating a goal during a match in Rio de Janeiro last week.

Credit...

Wagner Meier/Getty Images

For some, the possibility of such a trip might already be doomed. Visa wait times for several countries — including Colombia, whose fans typically attend World Cups in significant numbers — stretch past next summer's tournament. Iran, the first team from Asia to qualify for the World Cup, is on the list of 12 countries that Mr. Trump banned travel from this week. He carved out an exception for athletes and staff in the World Cup and other sporting events, but not for fans.

In the most recent tournaments in Russia and Qatar, the host countries and FIFA agreed on a visa waiver program for most ticket holders. Nothing similar is in place for next summer.

The Trump administration's tough immigration policies have also affected World Cup staffing, according to two people with direct knowledge of the issue. FIFA typically hires contractors experienced in major complex events like the Olympics to help stage the tournament. For the 2026 World Cup, that process has proved harder than usual, including the government turning down some visa requests and asking why FIFA cannot hire Americans for the work, according to a soccer official briefed on the planning.



A FIFA spokesman disputed that the process to obtain work visas had been difficult and noted that the organization had a staff of 800 in Miami and planned to send Europe-based personnel to help. The spokesman declined to comment on the possibility of fans from certain countries being barred from attending the World Cup or what efforts FIFA was making to ensure ticket holders could attend.

The Department of Homeland Security also declined to comment.

FIFA is also hosting a monthlong, billion-dollar tournament starting next week called the Club World Cup, which will bring 32 club teams, including Flamengo, to the United States. The first of its kind, the tournament is a precursor to next summer's World Cup.

For Mr. Mizael's group, the immigration developments have soured plans for what would have been a festival of soccer in the coming weeks.

Watch parties were shelved, as were discussions of group travel to matches in Philadelphia and Orlando, amid fears of a bus of immigrants making themselves a target. "That's something we can't have on our conscience," Mr. Mizael said.

Image



Mr. Trump and Gianni Infantino, the president of FIFA, in the Oval Office with the Club World Cup trophy in March.

Credit...

Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

Thousands of seats remain unsold for the club tournament, and FIFA officials attributed at least part of the shortfall to fan concerns about their visa status, according to the soccer official and an additional official.

Sales have been so poor that FIFA has repeatedly lowered prices. Prices on resale platforms are dropping for the opener, which features Inter Miami, a team that sold out stadiums across the country last year when the Argentine great Lionel Messi joined its roster. Other factors for the apparent lack of interest include the absence of some of Europe's biggest teams, the initial ticket prices and uncertainty about a new tournament.

The FIFA spokesman denied that ticket sales were "low" for fans based in the United States but did not provide sales totals. He said fans from more than 130 countries had purchased tickets.

The White House has shown high interest in next year's World Cup. Mr. Trump established a task force that he chairs, and FIFA's president, Gianni Infantino, appeared in the Oval Office, where the club tournament's enormous golden trophy was on display for weeks.

At a task force meeting last month, Vice President JD Vance said fans could look forward to a "seamless experience" visiting the United States and anticipated visitors from around 100 countries.

Yet he also cautioned them not to outstay their welcome. "When the time is up," he said, "they'll have to go home."

**Tariq Panja** is a global sports correspondent, focusing on stories where money, geopolitics and crime intersect with the sports world.