

Palestinians and supporters fly flag in emotional World Cup qualifier

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Kuwait City, November 22 (RHC)-- Palestinian flags and the black and white keffiyeh scarf have flown high at Kuwait's Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium as Palestine took on Australia in a World Cup qualifier. Thousands of Palestinians and their supporters turned out on Tuesday at the 60,000-seat venue for the football game, Palestine's first in front of fans since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

“Palestine is in our hearts. We came to the stadium, old and young, in support,” Anfal Al-Azmi, a 45-year-old Kuwaiti woman, told the Agence France-Presse news agency.

Defender Harry Souttar’s 18th-minute goal was all that separated the teams as Australia won 1-0 in a game where the action on the pitch was almost incidental.

The game was played more than six weeks after Palestinian Hamas fighters killed 1,200 people and took about 240 hostages in southern Israel, Israeli officials say, in an attack launched from the Gaza Strip on October 7.

Israel, promising to destroy Hamas, has unleashed a ferocious air and ground assault on Gaza in response, killing more than 14,100 people, including 5,600 children, according to Palestinian officials. “We do not care about the match. We came to deliver a message,” said Wael Youssef Labbad, 40, a Palestinian from Ashkelon, Israel.

“We, the Palestinian people, are always present with the keffiyeh and the flag.”

Palestine’s red, black, white and green flag was ubiquitous at the game – which was moved from Ramallah in the occupied West Bank because of the war – and many fans twirled the distinctive keffiyehs as they chanted. Others held up “Free Gaza” banners and pictures of keys, symbolising the homes lost by Palestinians during the Nakba, or the catastrophe, when more than 700,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced around the founding of Israel in 1948.

Australia’s players will donate a portion of their match fee to humanitarian operations in Gaza, whose situation was described as “horrific” by visiting coach Graham Arnold. Not all the fans were Palestinian. Many came from communities in the oil-rich Gulf country.

“Kuwait and Palestine are one. Today we are guests of Palestine in their land,” said Kuwaiti Ahmed Al-Anezi, 36, who was draped in the Palestinian flag and wore a keffiyeh. “Today, I and my entire family came to provide support to the Palestinian people and to consolidate the first Arab cause in the souls of my children.”

Syrian university student Yahya Shafer, 18, said: “We are here to support our brothers and sisters. We are one, and victory is ours.”

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