

France braces for Israel football match after violence in Amsterdam

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France is deploying about 3,000 extra police officers in order to prevent clashes during the France-Israel game [File: Isabel Infantes/Reuters]

Paris, November 13 (RHC)-- Thousands of extra security officials are being deployed in and around Paris for a France-Israel football match on Thursday which comes a week after violence exploded on the streets of Amsterdam.

Pro-Palestinian groups are urging France against playing host to sporting teams of Israel while it is waging wars and deadly attacks in Gaza, the occupied West Bank and Lebanon, arguing that similar measures were taken against Russia over its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Meanwhile, few have snapped up tickets for the match at the Stade de France, which is north of Paris, throwing into question for some the necessity of a large-scale police operation.

Officials say security at the match will be extremely reinforced. Police officers will be deployed in and around Stade de France and across public transport networks.

Measures are being beefed up in part to prevent the kind of clashes that broke out in Amsterdam, the Dutch capital, before and after a football match between Israel's Maccabi Tel Aviv and the Netherlands's Ajax team.

Leopold Lambert, an editor and architect in the French capital, said, "The atmosphere in Paris, at least for people who both have Palestine and football in mind, is the desire for a strong solidarity action to happen, which probably will have to occur outside of the stadium given the massive police apparatus."

Pro-Palestinian protesters plan to rally in front of the Saint-Denis town hall, which is about a 20-minute walk from the stadium, on Thursday evening to express their opposition to the match.

"Israel being involved in sports, being involved in everything else, is what they want so that we stop talking about Gaza or the genocide," Nadim Smair, a Jordanian Palestinian restaurateur and event producer in Paris, told Al Jazeera.

French President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Michel Barnier plan to attend Thursday's game as a "message of fraternity and solidarity after the intolerable acts of anti-Semitism that followed the match in Amsterdam this week", Macron's office said in a statement sent to AFP. His words echoed the sentiment among many Western leaders following the game in the Netherlands, casting the chaos in the Netherlands as anti-Semitic while appearing to downplay any hurt caused to pro-Palestinian groups.

On the eve of the Amsterdam match, Israeli fans burned a Palestinian flag and destroyed a taxi. On the way to the game, videos showed Israeli fans chanting anti-Arab phrases. Following the football match, people on scooters attacked Israeli fans and others hit them with fireworks. Five Israelis were hospitalised and 20 to 30 received mild injuries.

Other prominent political figures including the ex-Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy, Francois Hollande and Gerard Larcher, former president of the Senate, also plan to watch the match.

"We all know what Macron's position is [on Israel], in a sense, even though they go back and forth on where they stand," said Smair. "To be honest, a game happening in France and all the news around it is a distraction from the reality in Gaza."

Lambert said while Macron has made some "performative gestures" on the Israel-Palestine conflict, "none of these gestures would make us think that he's not fully supportive of the genocidal siege. And in going to the stadium, he's only making it even more apparent."

Sabine Agostini, a French Lebanese supporter of France's national football team, believes the match should be cancelled. "One, for political reasons: Europe has censured Russian athletes and should do the same with Israeli athletes. And for security reasons, as well. Also, football and sports in general convey positive values, which is not at all the case with this match," she told Al Jazeera.

'Shame that politics gets into sports'

Of the 80,000 seats available at Stade de France, only 20,000 tickets had been sold at the time of publishing – the lowest turnout since the stadium's inauguration.

Previously, the worst attendance for a French team match was 37,000 spectators in June 2003, against New Zealand.

Rodrigue Flahaut-Prevot, a lawyer in Paris who has season tickets to Parc des Princes and Stade Velodrome in Marseille, said that politics and sport should remain separate.

"I'm very attached to respect for the law, and today, like all citizens, I deplore the fact that one community is attacking the other. But above all, I find it sad that this issue has become politicised," Flahaut-Prevot said. "In France, secularism means keeping religion out of the public sphere ... political debate should be the same, kept out of sports."

The violence in Amsterdam was an exception, rather than typical of football fans, he suggested. "If we don't stir up hatred between communities, I think people can live perfectly peacefully, especially in stadiums. Because it's just sports. And it's a shame that politics gets into sports."

For the France-Israel match, 4,000 police officers are set to be mobilised, compared with the typical 1,200-1,300 when the stadium is sold out, according to Paris police prefect Laurent Nunez.

Israeli authorities have advised supporters against going to the match in France and warned Israelis abroad against wearing recognisable Israeli or Jewish symbols.

Lawmakers from left-wing party France Unbowed (LFI), which is sympathetic to the suffering of Palestinians, have added their voice to boycott calls. "There is an active boycott on that game, and so many of us will absolutely not watch it, despite our love for football," Lambert said.

Global opposition to Israel's genocide of Palestinians in Gaza is increasingly visible at football events.

Last week, Paris Saint-Germain fans unveiled a "Free Palestine" banner during a Champions League match at Parc des Princes stadium. French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau criticised the move, saying that the banner "had no place in the stadium".

[Source: Al Jazeera]

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