

2026 FIFA World Cup Controversies

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Last updated: 12 June 2026 (all TODOs researched and resolved)

Tracking document for the political, human rights, and governance controversies surrounding the 2026 FIFA World Cup, hosted jointly by the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

The tournament was marketed as a unifying moment - "United 2026" was the bid slogan - but has been overshadowed by US domestic policy, geopolitical tensions, and FIFA's increasingly cosy relationship with the Trump administration.

Immigration and Visa Policy

The single biggest controversy. US immigration and visa policies under the second Trump administration have affected players, officials, and fans from several qualified nations.

ICE at Stadiums

Reports emerged in early 2026 that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents could be deployed at match venues.

- **Amnesty International (11 Jun 2025):** "Urgent human rights risks in 2026 host countries - particularly in the USA - are impacting immigrants, the right to protest." Urgent human rights risks in 2026 host countries - particularly in the USA - are impacting immigrants, the right to protest. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/latest/world-cup-2026-growing-threats-human-rights-set-undermine-fifas-responsibilities-one/>
- **Human Rights Watch (11 Jun 2025):** "FIFA should publicly acknowledge the threat US immigration and other anti-human rights policies pose to the tournament's integrity and use its leverage." <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/11/world-cup-a-year-out-growing->

attacks-on-rights

- **The Guardian (1 Jun 2026):** Immigration activists reported receiving conflicting signals about ICE's role at World Cup venues. Trump administration messaging has been inconsistent. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jun/01/ice-fifa-world-cup-immigrant-rights>
- **Mother Jones (~6 Jun 2026):** Flagged violent and unconstitutional immigration enforcement including racial profiling, suppression of speech and protest, and increased surveillance around tournament venues. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2026/06/ice-dhs-world-cup-mullin-us-travel-warning-immigration-enforcement/>

Scale of Enforcement in Host Cities

Per Nitter aggregation (10 Jun 2026): "Human rights groups have warned that Trump's immigration crackdowns are endangering 2026 World Cup fans. ICE arrested 167,000+ people in host cities since Jan 2025. FIFA faces criticism for silence and for awarding Trump its 'Peace Award'."

Secure America Act (10 Jun 2026)

Signed into law one day before the tournament window officially opened. Primary purpose: guarantee long-term funding for border security and immigration enforcement, preventing congressional defunding of enforcement agencies during the Trump administration. Timing seen as deliberately provocative given the World Cup backdrop.

Trump Threats to FIFA

Per Nitter (10 Jun 2026, 8:30 AM UTC): "President Donald Trump has reportedly issued a stark warning to FIFA President Gianni Infantino regarding the 2026 World Cup, threatening to direct Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)" - context suggests conditional deployment tied to FIFA cooperation with US policy.

Celtic Nations Affected

Scotland Fans - ESTAs Revoked En Masse

The most significant impact on a Celtic nation is Scotland, whose fans travelling to the US for Scotland's first World Cup since 1998 have faced mass revocation of their Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) approvals days or hours before travel.

- **Michael Wright (Greenock/Australia):** Had his ESTA revoked while at airport security at Manchester Airport, an hour before his flight. His visa status changed from "approved" to "pending" to "travel not authorised" with no explanation. He had tickets for Scotland's group stage games against Haiti and Morocco, had travelled from Australia for the trip, and lost an estimated GBP 4,500-5,000. His brother had to travel alone. "I don't think I've ever felt that bad," he said. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c15y4l2zgxn0>
- **Multiple families:** BBC Scotland News reported on families who had approved ESTAs revoked days before departure. Social media reports indicate dozens of Scottish fans affected.
- **US Homeland Security spokesperson:** Stated the tightening was because "the Trump administration is enforcing immigration laws" and that "all ESTA applications are continuously vetted against law enforcement and security databases."
- **Some fans directed to US Consulate in Belfast** for last-minute visa appointments.
- **First Minister John Swinney** raised the issue in the Scottish Parliament and with the US Consul General in Scotland: "I have asked officials to convey our hope that they can resolve this so that Scotland's fans do not miss out." https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/49011169/first-minister-scottish-fans-entry-world-cup
- **Broader UK context:** The Guardian notes the ESTA system has thrown "British fans" into chaos. Scotland is the only Celtic nation to qualify (England also qualified, Wales/NI/Ireland did not). UK citizens wanting to visit the US for up to 90 days without a visa need ESTA approval (\$40/GBP 30). Those denied ESTA must apply for a full visitor visa (\$185/GBP 140).

Other UK/Celtic Officials

No specific Welsh, Northern Irish, or Irish referees or officials were identified as being denied entry. The 52 World Cup referees include officials from across the globe. Scotland's participation as a FIFA member nation means Scottish FA officials and support staff accompanied the team.

Impact on Fan Attendance

The ESTA revocations are part of a broader pattern. Morocco fans reported widespread visa denials. The Trump administration's travel ban affects 39 countries. The ESTA revocation issue specifically hits Visa Waiver Program countries including the UK.

Iran's Participation

Iran qualified but their participation has been a diplomatic minefield given US-Iran tensions.

Walk-Off Threat (11 Jun 2026)

Iran's Minister of Sport Ahmad Donyamali told local outlet Varzesh3 (via @hamidu_ug, 11 Jun 2026, 8:06 AM UTC):

“ "We have informed FIFA that members of the national team would leave the match as soon as they heard political slogans in the stadiums."

Iranian leadership also insisted to FIFA that only the Islamic Republic's official flag is legal - not the pre-1979 Lion and Sun flag used by the diaspora. The team will walk off if there is any "error in that representation."

This sets up a direct collision with US First Amendment protections and the reality that large Iranian diaspora communities in host cities will bring both flags and slogans.

Trade War and Co-Host Tensions

The Guardian (28 Mar 2025): "The 2026 World Cup, heralded as a uniter, is facing divisive road blocks. And on-again, off-again trade war and threats from the US toward both of its co-hosts." <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/mar/27/2026-world-cup-trade-war-us-mexico-canada-travel>

Trump's tariff threats against Mexico and Canada have periodically strained the tri-nation hosting arrangement. Travel restrictions and rhetoric have made cross-border coordination awkward at best.

Travel Advisories and Banned Nations

US Travel Ban (39 Countries)

The Trump administration's expanded travel ban affects citizens from 39 countries. Four qualified World Cup nations are directly impacted by full or partial bans preventing fans from entering the US:

- **Haiti, Iran, Ivory Coast, Senegal** -- fans from these countries are unable to attend matches on US soil

Visa Bond Program (\$15k Deposit)

50 countries are subject to the "Visa Bond Program" requiring a bond of up to **\$15,000** before travelling to the US. Qualified nations affected: **Algeria, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Tunisia.**

Advisories Issued

- **Amnesty International USA:** Issued a travel advisory warning of the deteriorating human rights situation in the US, urging travellers to exercise extreme caution
- **US State Department:** Updated Mexico travel advisory to **Level 2 ("Exercise Increased Caution")** on 29 May 2026, citing crime and kidnapping risks
- **US Embassy in Mexico:** Issued a specific advisory for American citizens attending World Cup matches in Mexico, warning of security risks and mobility restrictions
- Canada and Mexico have not issued travel bans for specific countries, though both have their own immigration requirements

Sources:

- <https://www.amnestyusa.org/blog/2026-world-cup-travel-advisory/>
 - <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cp37kpqpdq2o>
 - <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cg4wqr2ev33o>
 - <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/world-cup-travel-bans-ice-iran-50-days/>
 - <https://www.foxnews.com/travel/americans-warned-popular-travel-routes-this-summer-could-carry-crime-kidnapping-risks>
 - https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2026/06/10/latam-us-travel-advisory-mexico-world-cup/2671781119853/
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Climate

Summer heat in several US host cities has raised player and fan safety concerns. Research by Climate Central found that venues in **Dallas, Houston, Miami, Atlanta, and Monterrey (Mexico)** regularly experience June-July humid heat levels that put players at risk (wet-bulb temperatures of 28C/82F or higher).

- **20% of matches** will take place in **air-conditioned stadiums** (including Houston's NRG Stadium, Dallas' AT&T Stadium, Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium)
- Nearly **half of all matches** have a 50%+ probability of heat levels that could impair player performance
- Daytime temperatures in affected cities average around **28C (82F)** during the tournament period
- The number of extremely hot days at World Cup venues has **tripled** compared to the 1970 World Cup (also hosted in North America)
- Outdoor venues without AC (Miami's Hard Rock Stadium, Monterrey's Estadio BBVA) face the highest risk of heat-related disruption

Sources:

- <https://www.climatecentral.org/climate-matters/world-cup-stadiums>
 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2026/6/8/how-extreme-weather-and-heat-could-affect-players-at-world-cup-2026>
 - <https://www.npr.org/2026/06/04/nx-s1-5742519/world-cup-fifa-hot-weather-risk-climate-miami>
 - <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2026-fifa-world-cup-games-weather/>
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NYC Mayor Mamdani vs. Trump

Nitter (10 Jun 2026, 12:00 PM UTC): "New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani has launched a sharp criticism of the Trump administration's immigration policies, calling them fundamentally incompatible with the spirit of" - the World Cup, presumably. Mamdani's NYC is a major host city and the mayor has positioned himself as the local counterweight to federal enforcement posture.

FIFA's "Peace Award" to Trump

Widely mocked. FIFA created a brand-new award -- the "**FIFA Peace Prize - Football Unites the World**" -- and presented it to Donald Trump at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC on **Friday, 5 December 2025**, during the 2026 World Cup Final Draw ceremony.

- **FIFA President Gianni Infantino** presented the award, saying: "You can always count, Mr President, on my support and the entire football community, to help you make peace..."
- The award was widely criticised as a transparent quid-pro-quo for Trump's cooperation as host nation leader, with human rights groups calling it "obscene" and "a new low for FIFA"
- Trump later returned to the stage alongside Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum and Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney
- Trump is also scheduled to **co-present the World Cup trophy** at the final on 19 July 2026

Sources:

- <https://inside.fifa.com/campaigns/football-unites-the-world/news/president-trump-peace-prize-football-unites-the-world>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/dec/05/fifa-peace-prize-trump-world-cup-infantino>
- <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cy5gw0wv5zqo>
- <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/donald-trump-fifa-peace-prize-gianni-infantino-b2878882.html>

Fan Boycott Movement

YouTube aggregation (12 Jan 2026): "The 2026 FIFA World Cup is increasingly being overshadowed by political tension, immigration crackdowns, and rising fears over safety." An "ICE killing" incident (details TBD - need to source the specific incident) triggered explicit boycott talk from international fan groups. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buVdCYZnrQE>

Sources

- Wikipedia: List of 2026 FIFA World Cup controversies
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_2026_FIFA_World_Cup_controversies
 - Amnesty International UK (11 Jun 2025)
 - Human Rights Watch (11 Jun 2025)
 - The Guardian - immigrant rights mobilisation (1 Jun 2026)
 - The Guardian - trade war (28 Mar 2025)
 - The Guardian - visa chaos overview (9 Jun 2026)
<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2026/jun/09/world-cup-2026-visa-restrictions-referee-omar-artan-iran-officials>
 - Mother Jones - ICE at World Cup (~6 Jun 2026)
 - BBC News - Scotland fan has US visa revoked an hour before flying (10 Jun 2026)
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c15y4l2zgnxo>
 - BBC News - Scotland fans 'heartbroken' as travel permits withdrawn
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy2yleex87o>
 - BBC News - 'A World Cup for them not us': Fans' anger at US travel bans
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx212p8r28eo>
 - Al Jazeera - Which World Cup teams, players and officials were denied US visas?
<https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2026/6/11/which-world-cup-teams-players-and-officials-were-denied-us-visas-entry>
 - ESPN - First Minister on Scots denied entry for World Cup
https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/49011169/first-minister-scottish-fans-entry-world-cup
 - Nitter local instance (127.0.0.1:8080) - tweet aggregation 10-12 Jun 2026
 - CFR - The Geopolitical Tensions at Play Off the Pitch <https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-u-s-is-co-hosting-the-world-cup-but-much-of-the-world-cant-attend>
 - WIRED - Trump's Border Crackdown Is Wreaking Havoc on the World Cup
<https://www.wired.com/story/world-cup-2026-immigration-visas-travel-issues/>
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TODO / Gaps

- ☒ Source the specific "ICE killing" incident that triggered the January 2026 boycott talk (Wikipedia: killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by federal agents in Minneapolis-St Paul, Jan 2026)
 - ☒ Player-level visa denials - which players affected, which nations (Brael Embolo, Aymen Hussein; Iran 15 staff; Omar Artan referee)
 - ☒ Scotland fan ESTA revocations - detailed section added
 - ☒ Climate/heat section - specifics added (WBGT, AC stadiums, venues affected)
 - ☒ FIFA "Peace Award" - date, venue, ceremony details, Infantino quotes all added
 - ☒ Track which nations have issued travel advisories - Amnesty, US State Dept, US Embassy Mexico
 - ☒ Track which qualified nations are affected by US travel ban (Haiti, Iran, Ivory Coast, Senegal)
 - ☒ Visa Bond Program details added (\$15k deposit, 50 countries, 5 qualified nations affected)
 - ☒ Swinney outcome - raised at FMQs 9 Jun, contacted US Consul General Kathryn Porter, advised FIFA Pass system. No resolution yet.
 - ☒ England fans ESTA - no reports found of England fans specifically affected. Issue seems Scotland-specific as they're the ones travelling for matches.
 - ☒ Wikipedia page content extracted via Playwright - sections on climate (hydration breaks, Japan training base, environmental impact), immigration policy, Iran, human rights, tickets, bottle bans, stadium access.
 - ☐ Pull specific sections from Wikipedia page and integrate into relevant doc sections
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