

FIFA remembers Argentina 1978 as 'a great World Cup'

It has been 30 years, but FIFA stands by its interpretation of the 1978 World Cup in Argentina: It was 'a great World Cup'.

And any country on the planet, even a bloody dictatorship, has the right to host a World Cup.

'It seems that the way fans and the media remember that event is that it was a great World Cup,' FIFA president Joseph Blatter said of the final in which Argentina beat the Netherlands 3-1 in Buenos Aires.

When asked whether three decades later FIFA regrets anything about the tournament, the Swiss made it clear that it does not.

The 1978 World Cup was played in very particular circumstances.

Argentina was ruled by a military dictatorship since March 1976, and by mid-1978, when 16 national teams started to play for the title, allegations of human rights abuses and of the disappearance of thousands of people were rife, particularly in circles outside the South American country.

Nowadays, human rights organisations believe that up to 30,000 people 'disappeared' during the 1976-83 regime: they were never seen again alive, and their bodies were never found.

One of the regime's largest clandestine detention centres was only a few hundred metres from the Monumental Stadium where the World Cup final was played.

That tournament was truly marked by goals and dictatorship.

FIFA had chosen Argentina to host the tournament in London July 6, 1966, just eight days after a military coup brought down President Arturo Illia - democratically elected three years earlier - and put General Juan Carlos Onganía in his place.

Ten years later, on August 21, 1976, General Omar Actis - in charge of organising the World Cup - was murdered.

Admiral Carlos Lacoste - who would later become FIFA vice president for some of the 24 years that it was led by Brazilian Joao Havelange - took charge of the preparations.

Blatter was not at the helm of FIFA at the time of the 1978 World Cup, but looking into the future, he still does not believe democratic or institutional quality in a country should determine whether it can host a World Cup. And he does not believe in boycotts either.

'A boycott never adds anything, particularly not to sport. On the contrary, we believe that sport, and football in particular, can help promote positive values and unite people beyond their social background, their gender, religion or political ideas,' Blatter said.

That is why the Swiss is adamant: any country can host a World Cup. China - set to host the Olympics in August - hosted a Women's World Cup, despite criticism of the Chinese regime.

'At FIFA we believe that any of the member associations have the right to take part in and to put themselves forward to host any of the tournaments we organise,' Blatter insisted, explicitly ruling out any kind of democratic clause.

Faced with the question of whether FIFA would again allow Argentina to host a World Cup, faced with a situation similar to that 30 years ago, Blatter resorted to a diplomatic reply.

'It would not make sense to compare the world situation 30, 50 or 100 years ago with the current one. We cannot speculate,' he said.

However, Blatter's underlying inclination is equally evident. He thinks football 'contributes to social, political and human development', and that its 'universality' helps 'combat social ills and promote development'.

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