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The African Cup and Ebola: Morocco's Refusal Rooted in Fear and Prejudice?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Morocco's refusal to host the 2015 African Cup of Nations soccer tournament for fear that it could import the Ebola virus from West Africa goes beyond concern about a spreading pandemic. It also spotlights the complex relations between the continent's Arab and sub-Saharan nations.

Commentary

MOROCCO'S REFUSAL to host the 2015 African Cup of Nations for fear that it could import Ebola from West Africa spotlights the complex relations between the continent's Arab and sub-Saharan nations. The refusal reflects Arab prejudice towards black Africa. The Moroccan decision, which violated the terms of its agreement to host the 2015 African Cup of Nations has prompted the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to ban it from competing in Africa's biggest sporting event. The Moroccan decision, however, appears mired in contradiction while the CAF ruling reflects its non-transparent inner workings.

Morocco cannot escape the impression that its decision was informed by prejudice grounded in the facts that Arabs were once among the continent's foremost slave traders, Morocco's emergence as a major transit point for sub-Saharan migrants seeking to reach Europe, and concern about the possible impact of an Ebola case on tourism that accounts for an estimated ten percent of GDP. CAF has repeatedly declared that the World Health Organisation (WHO) had assured it that Ebola need not be a concern in deciding on a Moroccan request to postpone until next summer the tournament that is scheduled for January.

African tourism takes a hit

The three countries most affected by the virus – Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea – are moreover unlikely to qualify for the African Cup. Liberia has already been disqualified, Sierra Leone is at the bottom of its group, and Guinea has at best an outside chance. Morocco's concern about a possible spread of the virus is further called into question by the fact that it has hosted a number of Guinean qualifiers because they could not be played in Guinea itself.

Morocco's justification is in contrast to the African Cup for which it has agreed to honour its

commitment to host next month's World Club Cup. The Cup is likely to attract far more foreign fans than the African tournament.

Morocco's decision was likely influenced by the fact that African tourism has already taken a substantial hit as a result of Ebola. The *Daily Telegraph* reported last month that travellers were putting off trips even to countries like South Africa and Kenya that are far from West Africa and have not been affected by the virus and that hotel occupancy rates in Nigeria have dropped by half.

Slave trade, trade and Islam

Arab relations with sub-Saharan Africa moreover have a long and complex history. "The relationship between Arabs and black Africans has always been largely asymmetrical-with the Middle East usually the giver, and black Africa usually the receiver. Throughout the history of their involvement in black Africa the Arabs have been both conquerors and liberators, both traders in slaves and purveyors of new ideas," wrote scholar Ali A Mazroui in *Foreign Affairs* in 1975.

Mazroui's views have been challenged by black nationalists who deny that Arabs are part of Africa despite the fact that Arab nations populate the north of the continent. They have also demanded reparations for what Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka denounced as their "cultural and spiritual savaging of the continent" and condemned huge purchases of African land by Gulf investors as part of a food security strategy as a new form of colonialism.

The dark side of Arab-African relations has gained a new lease on life with the influx of sub-Saharan immigrants into North Africa. Moroccan Labour Minister, Abdelouahed Souhail, recently charged that sub-Saharan immigrants were boosting his country's unemployment rate. Estimates for the number of sub-Saharans in Morocco range from 10-15,000. *Maroc Hebdo*, a Moroccan magazine, ran a cover story this summer entitled, 'The Black Peril'.

In response to the exacerbation of racially-tinged attitudes by Ebola and migration as well as at times hysterical reporting on the virus in Moroccan and Arab media, Forum Anfa, a Moroccan NGO, launched this month a campaign under the slogan, "I am a Moroccan, I am an African".

Morocco World News quoted Global Opus Prize winner and women's activist Aicha Ech-Chenna as saying: "It is not enough to say I am Moroccan, I'm African. We have to accept Sub-Saharans as they are, with their religions, Christians or Muslims...We do not need to ask them to convert or change to accept them, we all have an African Identity."

A crisis of governance

Defending CAF's decision to go ahead with the African Cup in a yet to be determined replacement for Morocco, CAF executive committee member Constant Omari told French radio that the cost to the group and its sponsors would be too high to justify postponing the tournament as Morocco had requested.

Omari did not detail what the cost would be in line with the group's refusal to reveal its finances. Mr. Omari's comments focused attention on the issue at a time that world soccer governance has been rocked by the worst crisis in its history.

With FIFA unable and unwilling to shake the cloud of allegations of corruption and unsavoury dealings that hangs over it since 2010, CAF like FIFA and other regional federations will find their lack of transparency and accountability increasingly hard to defend.

Flush with petrodollars, Equatorial Guinea has agreed to replace Morocco as the host of the African Cup. In doing so, it highlighted the underbelly of Arab-African relations at a time that Gulf states are seeking to secure access to African resources. To put African-Arab relations on a footing that is based on more than investment, Arabs will have to confront their troubled history with sub-Saharan Africa.

A first step in that direction would be a credible denunciation of racism and a contribution to

confronting Ebola as a global threat rather than a policy that seeks to insulate the Arab world against an African problem - a policy that serves to reinforce long-standing prejudice.

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