



**SPORTING DISASTERS IN STADIA: 6TH JULY, 2017 BINGU NATIONAL STADIUM
IN MALAWI: WHAT WENT WRONG AND LESSONS LEARNT**

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Abstract

Due to a large number of individuals involved during large sporting events such as a football match, the likelihood of something unusual happening is very high. A lot of lives have been lost in the past in different stadia during sporting events. Malawi as a nation experienced its own football stadia disaster on the 6th of July 2017. On this day, the country had organized a match between two of the most famous clubs in the country, the Nyasa Big Bullets and Silver strikers. The match was part of the events to mark celebrations of the fifty third independence. Eight lives were lost of which seven were children below the age of twelve years and about forty individuals were injured. A closer look into what transpired to have led to the incident revealed a lot of gaps that need to be addressed to make stadia safe and secure for everyone. These gaps include, lack of involvement of expertise in the field of sports in planning of sporting events as these as the match was done without calculation of the maximum safe capacity of the stadium. Lack of a Functional Venue Operation Center, lack of preparedness from the emergency medical support team at the stadium as it is usually the case in European organized sporting events. The author suggests multiagency collaboration to make sure that enough security is provided to the fans and

players in stadia in Malawi to ensure safety and security in stadia during sporting events. This multiagency collaboration must include the police, the organizers, the medical team, the officials the media and representatives of the supports clubs. The author also recommends that in no situation should teargas be used in any stadia in Malawi stadia to disperse the spectators as it has proven to lead to more casualties than necessary.

Key Words: Disaster, Sports, Stadium

Introduction

Sports is one of the events in the world that attracts people from all walks of life to gather at one place to relax, get entertained and to be celebrated. Sporting events have been part of human cultural and lifestyle for a long period of time. The ancient Olympia Games where the modern Olympics originates dates as far back as 776BC in Greece. Sports requires time and place set aside for people to gather and witness the event. Sporting mega events such as the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World cup and the Summer Olympics Games are able to gather millions of people at one place for a period of time. This accompanied with the diversity of human race and the emotional attachment of fans to their sport and different clubs, makes a sporting venue a high risk place for occurrence of disasters. To have a great number people gathered in one place requires strict measure to be put in place to safeguard their lives and property. Sporting events in the world have been marred by so many disasters that have taken lives, injured and destroyed a lot of property. Among all the sports/ games that are played worldwide, football or soccer as it is called in America is the most popular sport on earth with an estimate of 3.5 to 4 billion fans in the world (Das, 2019) against the world's population of 7.7 billion. Britain has been celebrated as the inventor of the modern football in 1863. It is not therefore surprising that it is during football matches in stadia that most of the sporting disasters occur.

Sporting disasters in stadium can result from two ways. Bad weather conditions as well as human made factors. Some bad weather associated disasters include hailstorms, strong winds and earthquakes. The man-made disasters include overcrowding, stampedes and crushes, fire breakout, bombing, police failing, poor stadium facility, as well sequential errors – snow ball effect where one occurrence leads to the other. It is the man-made sports disasters that have contributed to the loss of more lives during football matches

Whilst there is tremendous reduction in the occurrences of sporting disasters in overseas countries, Sporting disasters in football stadia has refused to die out in Africa. African football competitions are still characterized by a lot of ugly scenes during competition at local, national and international levels. The occurrences of sporting disasters in Africa stadia during football matches can be mostly attributed to poor security and safety measures being put in place during matches by the managers and organizers. There is poor organization of matches with little security and stewards to take control of matches. Poor police control of emergency stadia situations, poor facilities with limited technological innovations for monitoring fans behavior such as Closed-Circuit Televisions (CCTV) in stadiums as well as poor stadium designs that do not accommodate emergency evacuation plan during emergency situation.

The other assumption for the failure to curb sporting disasters in Africa is the failure by most football associations to set laws to guide safety and security of stadia during matches to be able to bring those responsible for violence in stadia to be held accountable for their actions. Hooliganism is still part of African sports and fans get away with this especially at local level. Despite that official reports are sometimes given out on the incidences, these have always lacked consistence and full details on how the incidence happened and so un able to identify the culprits and made them to account for their actions especially at local level. The failure of most African countries to train and higher enough stewards to help guide and maintain order during matches has resulted into the use of police with force on spectators that has worsened most situations. While security officials and the management of such tournaments are quick to blame the spectators on such incidences, the spec taros also push the blame to security officials. Around all this, there is no one left to be held responsible and get to account for the numerous loss of lives and properties that arise from such incidences.

In the awake of continued sporting disasters, this write up gives insight of the 6th July 2017 Bingu Nation Stadium Disaster in Malawi This write up looks at the security issues that led to the disaster, the lessons learnt and how to improve for future events.

The 6th July, 2017 Bingu National Stadium Disaster

Malawi as a nation experienced one of the latest sporting disasters in history during its 53rd Independence Day cerebrations from Britain since 1964 on the 6th of July, 2017. On the fateful day, the stadium was meant to host a match between Nyasa Big Bullets and Silver Strikers' local

clubs in the afternoon as part of the celebrations to mark the day. The president of the country, His excellence Professor Arthur Peter Mtharika was meant to grace the occasion. Bingu National Stadium is one of the new facilities in the nation which is located in the Capital City of the country, Lilongwe. It was constructed from 2013 and officially opened in 2015. The stadium acts as a home ground for the Malawi National football team.

It is worth mentioning that the search for the official report on the enquiry to establish the real cause of the disaster proved futile. One of the reasons that has been pointed out by a lot of reporters to have led to the disaster was the delay by stadium officials to open the gates to the stadium on time. This was a friendly match between two notable local teams and the president had made a call for the whole nation to come to the stadium and be able to patronize the match free of charge. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report on the day, the gates to the 41, 000 capacity Stadium were meant to be opened as early as 6:30 local time (04:30) Greenwich Mean Time ((GMT) but there was a delay of about three hours. This therefore meant that as the gates were being opened, there was a huge crowd of people lining up to enter into the stadium. Some spectators had already started forcing their way in after they had turned up at the scheduled time. Due to lack of proper guidance from stewards and volunteers on how to get into the stadium, they started pushing on the line to the entrance gates into the stadium. The police accelerated the situation when they used tear gas to disperse the crowd pushing on the gates. As people were trying to escape for their lives from the teargas, there were falls, crushes and stampedes that led to the death of eight people, seven children between five and twelve years and one adult. The stampede also injured more than forty others, most of them children. Despite the stampede, the match went ahead as planned in a packed stadium with Nyasa Big Bullets winning two goals to one.

Lessons learnt from the incident

This is just one of the many ugly incidences that occur in Malawi stadia that has led to loss of lives, injuries and property destruction. From this event, the country must awaken to the fact that every event that attracts a crowd in stadia requires deliberate security and safety measure to be put in place to safeguard life especially the lives of children. This incidence is a true indication of poor organization of sporting events especially in stadia in the country where multi agency corroboration is lacking. The Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in its handbook 'FIFA Stadium Safety and Security Regulations provides guidelines that should act as a template for any football match in a stadium with modifications made to suit the particular

country and specific facility of which if properly followed, would provide enough security and safety for all sporting events in stadia. This being a local match, that was expecting a huge turnover of spectators as it was free of charge, the delay in opening of gates for about three hours for spectators to start coming into the stadium is the last thing the organizers would have wanted to see happening. That led to a buildup of the crowd trying to force themselves into the stadium. This would have been avoided if there was proper management in the organization of the match where the event organizing manager made sure that everything is done on course and at the right time. There seemed to be a vacuum of power on who was to make sure things are happening according to the scheduled time. It will therefore be right to say that the overall organizer of the event was negligent in dealing with matters that led to loss of lives.

The poor management of the event is also portrayed by the lack of staffing needed to be in the Venue Operating Centre (VOC) to control all the processes that would have led to the successfulness of the event from the safety and security prospective before, during and after the match. Bingu National Stadium being a recent structure, one would expect the facility to have functional Closed-Circuit Televisions (CCTV). The primary function of the CCTV system is to allow personnel in the Venue Operating Centre to identify incidents, or potential problems, assist with the situational assessment and inform courses of action and responses. It is a requirement that every stadium must have Venue Operating Centre (VOC) well equipped and positioned where all activities are monitored and controlled from the arrival of the spectators to the last mile, to the ingress, circulation to the egress. From this ugly incidence, it will be true to assume that the event was poorly organized with no staffing in the VOC to monitor, control and make decisions when the lives of spectators was in danger. The CCTV should have been able to portray the behavior and the extent of the crowd on the gate at the entrance points and the information would have been reflected in the VOC where decisions on how to deal with the crowd would have been made beginning with proper information dissemination to the crowd through the public address system assuring the spectators to remain calm and stop pushing themselves into the stadiums. This would have helped to control the crowd to make sure no teargas was not used.

The other missing piece in managing this situation is the redness of the emergency medical support at the stadium to offer help to the injured. It is rare that as Africans, we prepare for the worse case scenarios at any event. This was evidenced by few medical personnel that were

present to assist the injured at the sporting venue as well as at the hospital. This therefore saves as a wakeup call to all managers of any sporting event to be ready for any misfortunes with enough and well equipped emergency medical team.

To add on the poor management by the organizers of the event, most of the stampedes and deaths occurring during sporting events have been worsened due to the police firing teargas on spectators to disperse the crowd without considering that there are children and people living with disabilities among the crowd that will be the first victims of such. Despite that using teargas to disperse the crowd has proven to be more fatal than a relief agent, the police continue to use such in stadium during emergency situations which must be discouraged at all cost. Police officers must find other ways of maintaining law and order within the crowd without using teargas as it accelerates the stampede. The FIFA stadium Safety and Security Regulations section 19 (b) states that ‘No firearms or “crowd control gas” shall be carried or used. Despite that this was not a FIFA organized match, the use of teargas to disperse the crowd at Bingu National Stadium was absolutely wrong. It is the duty for the event organizers to educate all the security personnel to be used to manage a match in the stadium including the police on the harmfulness of using teargas to disperse the crowd. The police should and must find other safe ways of dispersing the crowds during sporting events in closed spaces and not the use of control gas. As a nation, it is also time for the football association to invest in training stewards that have proved to be more effective in controlling spectator behavior than the police.

Another factor that was overlooked and had led to the buildup of more than enough spectators was the call for the whole nation to attend a match to a stadium that can only accommodate 41,000 spectators without proper procedures put in place. This is a common practice among most African leaders which has to be critically analyzed. This being an Independence celebratory match of the nation, it was right to declare the event free of charge. But it does not matter the type of event, the stadium maximum safe capacity has to be determined and be used for all events to be hosted at the stadium. The maximum safe capacity of the stadium which is determined by the (1) entry capacity, (2) holding capacity, (3) the exit capacity and (4) emergency evacuation capacity is the only safe way to determine how many individuals can be safely allowed to occupy a stadium during any match. Any football match despite the purpose it has to be handled by the sports ministry in collaboration with the football association department. The head of security and safety in the football association is supposed to be the

overall seer of the safety and security operations of a high risk match as this., I would recommend for future events, that there should be tickets printed that are equal to the maximum safe capacity of the stadium. These tickets should be distributed to the citizens free of charge days before the event so that the number of citizens entering the stadium is determined by the maximum safe capacity and no individuals without tickets should be allowed into the stadium. Once the call for free entry into the stadium has been made by the head of state, there is need for the media houses to also disseminate the information on how citizens can access the free tickets. The citizens should also be made fully aware that no person without the entry tickets will be allowed passage into the stadium. This will not only avoid overcrowding into the stadium, but it will also make sure that the individuals turning up for the event are given the way into the stadium depending on the maximum safe capacity and would have sorted out the issue of congestion on the line for people trying to get into the stadium. The FIFA Stadium Safety and Security Regulations section 22. (1) Emphasizes on accurately assessing the maximum safe capacity of a stadium as a crucial part to establishing a safe and secure environment. 'Overcrowded stadiums continue to result in serious injuries and fatalities, which FIFA finds unacceptable'. Just distributing tickets to citizens it is not enough. There is need for tickets to be made in categories. For example children age 6 years to 18 years should be given their own tickets and adults their own tickets, the Very Important People (VIP) and the Very Very Important People (VVP) must also be given their own tickets if not invitation letters and the total number of VVIP and VIP attending the event must be made available in advance plus their escorts to make sure that there is no overflow to the general spectators. Children are everywhere treated as special citizens, it was therefore wrong for children to be packed on the same entrance gate with adults since they can easily succumb to the smallest force. If tickets were given out prior before and with children having their own tickets, with proper and adequate stewards guidance, children would have been allocated their own turnstile to use to enter into the stadium. This would have reduced the risk of them getting trapped among the adult population into the stampede. If every individual coming to the stadium had a ticket that had probably given the entry gate and turnstile to use during the entry calculated with the amount of time it would take to clear all the spectators into the stadium probably there would have not been a build of spectators on the gates and hence been no case of stampede.

This incidence educates sports managers that does not matter the kind of sporting event you are organizing, whether local match, international match or celebratory match, there is need of

multiagency corroboration to make sure the incidence of sporting disasters especial in stadia comes to an end. Malawian organizers of sporting event must learn to follow all the security and safety measure that are considered useful in any sporting event. Since the FIFA stadium safety and security regulation do not specifically give rules on the age at which an individual is are allowed to come to the stadia by themselves, it is the duty of organizers to make sure that the environment is safe and secure for children and individuals living with disabilities. Sporting events that are to be attended by the heads of states require extra security and special management during organization as they pose more risk of overcrowding. This is so because most of the people coming to such an event do not really come to witness the event but rather follow their leader for political reasons. There is need to put in place strict measure to make sure such events are safe for all spectators. This will begin with proper stadium safety and security guild lines put in place by the football association to guide the conduct of spectators during all football matches.

Conclusion

Taylor (1990, p.12) wrote ‘It is not enough to aim only at the minimum measures necessary for safety. That has been, at best, the approach in the past and too often not even that standard has been achieved. What is required is the vision and imagination to achieve a new ethos for football. Grounds should be upgraded. Attitudes should be more welcoming. The aim should be to provide more modern and comfortable accommodation, better and more varied facilities, more consultation with the supporters and more positive leadership. If such a policy is implemented it will not only improve safety. There will also be an improvement in behavior, making crowd control easier’

Providing security to sporting fans requires multiagency corroboration. Sporting bodies, fans, organizers and governments must make deliberate efforts in ensuring that all sporting venues especially stadia are well covered with security services that provide a safe environment for spectators. Use of teargas and force by police and other security agents has proven to be more harmful and causing more casualties. This practice needs to be banned from the laws of all football associations in all government prospects not just by the FIFA matches. It should be a must for any sporting event to have an emergency evacuation plan ready and that all members of the team are aware of who is to initiate such plan in case it is required to do so. There is need for the preparation on the part of the medical team on the ways to carry casualties from the stadia to

the nearest health facility. In addition to that, all stadiums should be able to have their own clinic for emergencies during the events.

Fan behavior has led to more incidences of sporting disasters in stadia than anything else has. There is need for proper awareness amongst the fans that sports is not a place where violence is tolerated. Hooliganism should be discouraged at all cost. To add on that, there is need to enforce good management at all sporting venues especially stadia. Every football association, must have their own safety and security regulations that would be suitable for application in that nation. Regardless of the type of the match, whether at local, national and international levels, there is need to use the FIFA stadium Safety and security considerations in conjunction with the specific regulations set aside by the football association in organizing every football match. As sporting managers, it is our responsibility to make sure that every match complies with such safety and security guidelines in order to enforce security and safety among spectators. To deter would be offenders, there is need for proper enquiries to be made together with CCTV footages evidence would be presented and those found guilty of negligence in their line of duty that has led to loss of life and property to disasters during sporting events should be made to face the law.

Sports should be and must be a place where everybody feels safe and secured to attend and be able to follow the proceedings of the events without fear of losing their life and property. Sporting events where individuals from all over the world meet should continue to be the source of relaxation, internment and interaction for everyone in a safe and a secured environment.

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