ADS
Action pour les Droits Solidaires

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ADS Position on DRC financing of European football Clubs

Demand for Accountability: End the DR Congo sponsorship deals with Barcelona, AC Milan & AS Monaco – stand with survivors of SGBV

According to media reports and confirmed sources including the government officials and some mentioned football clubs, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) signed multi-million-dollar sponsorship deals with European football clubs, including Barcelona (€46.37 Million), Italian AC Milan (€18Millions) and AS Monaco (€4.8 Millions), to promote tourism and branding the DR Congo.

The most fundamental moral issue is that these clubs are accepting millions of dollars from a government whose citizens face severe humanitarian crises. Women and girls particularly in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo have experienced unprecedented experiences of sexual and gender-based violence; mainly rape, defilement and other sexual abuses. Corroborated sources including Human Rights Watch Report (2010) reveal that the DRC is "the worst place on earth to be a woman".

The government's decision to spend €69Million on football sponsorships rather than addressing these urgent needs raises serious moral and ethical questions about these agreements and the clubs' participation.

Action pour les Droits Solidaires (ADS), a Congolese women's rights organization, strongly condemns these agreements. ADS is concerned that the DR Congo government's decision to spend millions on foreign branding is deeply insensitive and immoral, given the ongoing severe humanitarian crisis, particularly the widespread sexual violence committed by state and non-state actors in the war-torn East. The organization highlights several key issues:

Ineffective adventure: Promoting tourism in the current DRC context is irrational while large parts of the country, including key national parks, remain highly insecure due to conflict. Over 70% of DRC major tourist sites (Virunga National Park, Nyiragongo – a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Idjwi Island, Okapi Wildlife Reserve), is ether under the control of the AFC/M23 rebel group or plagued by conflict and violence perpetuated by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a terrorist group operating in Ituri province. Moreover, governments such as the United States of America, United Kingdom, Italy, etc. issued "Do Not Travel" advisories (Level 4) due to armed conflict, crime, and disease such as Mpox. Promoting tourism to a country with "Do Not Travel" advisories and where major tourist sites are not under the full control of the state suggests either willful ignorance or deliberate disregard for the actual conditions in the DRC in pursuit of irrational interests.

Lack of tourism supportive infrastructure: Essential foundations for tourism (security, political stability, infrastructure - roads, utilities - electricity and water supply, hospitality services, community involvement, etc.) are critically absent or dysfunctional in the DRC.

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Prioritization: The funds spent on sponsorships should be directed towards urgent domestic needs, specifically guaranteeing citizen security, infrastructure development, payment of public servants, reparations for survivors of sexual violence among others.

Poor Governance: The deal occurs amidst documented widespread corruption, embezzlement, and mismanagement of public finances, raising questions about the legitimacy of the expenditure. For instance, A 2023 report by ODEP reveals massive corruption and mismanagement: $630 million embezzled in 2023 alone, with total irregularities estimated at $5-6 billion (10-12% of GDP) between 2019-2023.

Violence against women and children: Sexual violence against women and young girls, particularly in the East, remains alarmingly high, with recent reports detailing horrific cases and lack of justice. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) reported over 113,000 conflict-related SGBV cases in 2023, doubling in early 2024. UNICEF reported approximately 10,000 cases of sexual violence in Jan-Feb 2025 alone, with 35-45% involving children (a child raped every 30 mins). Between December and January 2025, ADS documented testimonies of victims of SGBV in three Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) camps of Bulengo, Lushagala Bushagara in North Kivu Province where thousands of women and young girls from 11 years to 70 years of age were raped or defiled respectively. According to the recent UN Group of Experts Report (July 2025), State forces FARDC and state sponsored Wazalendo are implicated in widespread looting, extortion, killings, and systematic sexual violence against civilians. Survivors face severe trauma, HIV/STD infection, unwanted pregnancies, destitution, and lack of justice or livelihood support.

ADS criticizes both the DR Congo government and European clubs (FC Barcelona, AS Monaco, AC Milan) for engaging in deals driven by financial gain and political expediency, ignoring the severe human cost and ethical implications, especially concerning the victims of sexual violence.

Actionable Recommendations

To the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

1. **Prioritize Humanitarian Needs:** Immediately redirect funds earmarked for international branding and sponsorships with FC Barcelona, AC Milan and AS Monaco towards addressing the critical humanitarian crisis, particularly in the East. This includes essential services, security provision, and direct support for survivors of sexual violence.
2. **Ensure Security and Justice:** Make the protection of civilians, especially women and girls, an absolute priority. Hold perpetrators of sexual violence, including state forces (FARDC, Wazalendo), accountable through credible investigations and prosecutions. Implement effective mechanisms for reparations and support for survivors.

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3. **Address Governance Failures:** Combat corruption and improve public financial management transparently. Implement measures to prevent
4. embezzlement and ensure public resources are used effectively for the benefit of the Congolese people.
5. **Develop Foundational Infrastructure:** Before investing in tourism promotion, invest in the basic infrastructure necessary to support it and the population, including security, hospitality education, utilities, etc.
6. **Ensure Transparency:** Provide clear justification and public accounting for all major expenditures, especially those involving international partnerships, demonstrating how they align with the country's most pressing needs and contribute to tangible improvements for citizens.

To the European Football Clubs (Barcelona, AS Monaco, AC Milan)

7. **Conduct Due Diligence:** Thoroughly assess the human rights situation, particularly regarding sexual violence and conflict, in the DRC before entering or continuing sponsorship deals. Understand the potential reputational and ethical risks associated with the partnership.
8. **Pause and Re-evaluate Partnerships:** Given the severe humanitarian crisis, ongoing conflict, widespread sexual violence, and documented governance issues in the DRC, the clubs should pause their agreements and conduct a comprehensive review of their compatibility with the club's values and the reality on the ground.
9. **Engage with Civil Society:** Consult with independent human rights organizations (ADS is willing to support) and local communities in the DRC to understand the impact of these partnerships and explore ways the clubs' influence or resources could be used constructively.
10. **Condition Sponsorship on Progress:** If the partnerships continue, link them to tangible improvements in the DRC, such as specific development projects, support for survivors of sexual violence, or initiatives promoting peace and security, rather than purely symbolic branding. Ensure the DRC government demonstrates progress in addressing the outlined issues.
11. **Transparency and Accountability:** Be transparent with their own fans and stakeholders about the nature of these deals, the situation in the DRC, and the steps being taken to ensure the partnerships are ethical and do not exacerbate the suffering of vulnerable populations. Therefore, European clubs should align their brands with ethical leadership—not complicity in suffering.
12. **Consider Ethical Alternatives:** Explore alternative ways to support or partner with the DRC that do not involve large financial transactions perceived as insensitive during a crisis, potentially focusing on grassroots development or humanitarian aid initiatives.