X December 2018

Dear Mr. Gianni Infantino,

We write to express our grave concern regarding the detention of a former player for Bahrain’s national football team, Hakeem AlAraibi, in Suan Phlu Immigration Detention Center (IDC) in Bangkok, based on the wrongful issuance of an INTERPOL Red Notice. Hakeem currently plays for Pascoe Vale FC in Melbourne, and was granted refugee status by Australia in 2017. He is now facing extradition to Bahrain, where he faces a real risk of imprisonment and torture.

In your capacity as the President of FIFA, we urge you to use your authority to pressure the Thai authorities to ensure Hakeem’s immediate release and allow him to make his way back to Australia safely.

**Hakeem’s Case**

In January 2014, Bahraini authorities sentenced Hakeem to 10 years imprisonment *in absentia* on charges of vandalising a police station, which he strongly denies. Hakeem fled to Australia in May 2014 and was later granted refugee status in November 2017. The visa allows Hakeem to remain in the country indefinitely and to travel to and from Australia, so long as he does not travel to Bahrain, the country from which he has sought protection. On 27 November 2018, upon [arriving](http://birdbh.org/2018/11/bahraini-refugee-footballer-facing-deportation-in-thailand/) at Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport (BKK) for a holiday, Hakeem was detained under INTERPOL’s “Red Notice”. The notice was issued at Bahrain’s request on the basis of Hakeem’s criminal conviction from 2014.

INTERPOL’s [policy](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.fairtrials.org%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2FINTERPOL-TEXT-ON-REFUGEE-POLICY.pdf&data=02%7C01%7Cmajzoua%40hrw.org%7C633c273342304fb7c99a08d6554103c6%7C2eb79de4d8044273a6e64b3188855f66%7C1%7C1%7C636790135067544940&sdata=35MwH15JMkDtcXNOi1C3W8QR9yxVW516sV2P4gGIHyg%3D&reserved=0) states that red notices cannot be applied to recognised refugees. Additionally, Hakeem was [told](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/dec/02/setback-for-australian-refugee-football-player-arrested-in-thailand) by Thai immigration authorities, following his initial detention at the airport, that he would be allowed to fly back to Melbourne on 1 December 2018. Instead, a few hours before his scheduled departure, Hakeem was taken to the IDC where he remains at risk of extradition.

If Hakeem is returned to Bahrain, he is highly likely to face torture and imprisonment. He previously was detained and tortured by Bahraini authorities in November 2012, allegedly due to the political activities of his brother. Since then, he has spoken publicly about the torture he endured, stating, “*They blindfolded me*. *They held me really tight, and one started to beat my legs really hard, saying: ‘You will not play soccer again. We will destroy your future.’*”

**Links to FIFA**

Bahrain’s systematic failure to provide access to the country for independent journalists has been widely reported, including in relation to FIFA events. Hakeem has been very critical of the current president of the Asian Football Confederation, and Vice President of FIFA, Sheikh Salman Al-Khalifa, especially during Salman’s candidacy for FIFA presidency in 2016. Hakeem conducted interviews with media outlets, including the [New York Times](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2016%2F02%2F25%2Fsports%2Fsoccer%2Fsheikhs-candidacy-opens-new-door-to-criticism-of-fifa-human-rights.html&data=02%7C01%7Cmajzoua%40hrw.org%7C633c273342304fb7c99a08d6554103c6%7C2eb79de4d8044273a6e64b3188855f66%7C1%7C1%7C636790135067544940&sdata=F%2BP8ezjnvqtFGkTkkbHXqqH9Hp4XwdRoMG8xRP37vS4%3D&reserved=0), the Guardian, and [ITV](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.itv.com%2Fnews%2F2015-11-03%2Fitv-news-speaks-to-bahraini-footballer-as-fifa-presidential-candidate-sheikh-salman-denies-allegations-of-torture%2F&data=02%7C01%7Cmajzoua%40hrw.org%7C633c273342304fb7c99a08d6554103c6%7C2eb79de4d8044273a6e64b3188855f66%7C1%7C1%7C636790135067544940&sdata=hIg6ysnw7cYXb4wdajLDQEse4m%2FtkISv2BsIa3Y8paw%3D&reserved=0), and discussed details of the torture he suffered in 2012 while in the custody of Bahraini law enforcement. Interestingly, one of the [journalists](https://cpj.org/2017/05/german-reporter-denied-bahrain-visa-to-cover-fifa-.php) who interviewed Hakeem and [reported critically](https://www1.wdr.de/mediathek/video/sendungen/sport-inside/video-wie-scheich-salman-fifa-praesident-werden-wollte-100.html) on Sheikh Salman Al-Khalifa, Robert Kempe, was banned from entering Bahrain in 2017, and therefore could not attend the 67th FIFA Congress.

In 2017, you [personally thanked](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/jul/17/bahrain-accused-sport-whitewash-history-torture-human-rights-abuses) Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad al-Khalifa, a son of the Bahraini King, for hosting FIFA’s 67th Congress in Manama. In May 2018, Sheikh Nasser, as Chairman of the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports, spoke about his [intent](http://www.gdnonline.com/Details/364099/Shaikh-Nasser-hails-Fifa-chiefs-support-to-football-in-Bahrain) to build a “real partnership with FIFA” and hailed you personally for “being a firm believer of (Bahraini) football and its capabilities to improve further.” Sheikh Nasser himself has been involved in human rights abuses, and called publicly for the punishment of sportsmen who participated in the Arab Spring in 2011.

**FIFA’s Human Rights Commitment**

FIFA has a [strong commitment](https://resources.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/footballgovernance/02/89/33/12/fifashumanrightspolicy_neutral.pdf) to all internationally recognised human rights, including those contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Paragraph 5 of FIFA’s [human rights commitment,](https://resources.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/footballgovernance/02/89/33/12/fifashumanrightspolicy_neutral.pdf) in particular, details FIFA’s willingness to go “*beyond its responsibility to respect human rights...by taking measures to promote the protection of human rights and positively contribute to their enjoyment especially where it is able to apply effective leverage to help increase said enjoyment or where this relates to strengthening human rights in or through football.*”

**Our Requests**

If deported to Bahrain, Hakeem will have to spend 10 years in prison on arbitrary charges and could face torture at the hands of a government who is well-known for crushing dissidents. We have reasonable grounds for concern for Hakeem’s fate, as the Thai authorities have previously extradited a Bahraini national, Ali Haroon, who was then subjected to torture. Ali was [extradited](https://twitter.com/SAlwadaei/status/1069517075532664832) by the Thai authorities in 2014, also on the basis of an INTERPOL arrest warrant issued at the request of Bahrain. At the time of the arrest Ali possessed a valid visa according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Ali’s family reported that he was severely beaten and forced onto a flight to Bahrain, and required hospitalization upon his arrival in Bahrain due to the injuries he sustained.

We, therefore, request that you use your leverage to urge the Thai authorities to facilitate the return of Hakeem AlAraibi to Australia and pressure the Bahraini government to cease its attempts to secure Hakeem’s unlawful return to Bahrain. We also ask that you investigate the role of Sheikh Salman in the red notice on Hakeem. Lastly, we urge you to issue a public statement condemning the arrest of Hakeem and publicly call for Thailand to release him.

Yours sincerely,

Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei

Director of the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy