

Stadium tragedy: Quo vadis, Indonesian soccer regulations?



Malang stadium tragedy in cartoon (JP/T. Sutanto)

Haekal Al Asyari and Yaries Mahardika Putro (The Jakarta Post)
Debrecen, Hungary/Surabaya ● Tue, October 4, 2022

Nothing can separate sports and supporters, especially in soccer, on which billions of fans worldwide invest their time, energy and money to support their teams. Driven by their emotional ties to their teams, supporters show their love through a variety of behavior, from cheering on them to engaging in acts of violence.

The Oct. 1 tragedy at the end of the match between Arema FC and archrival Persebaya Surabaya at Kanjuruhan Stadium in Malang, East Java, speaks volumes of the connection between sports and supporters. According to the police, 125 people were killed in the incident, making it the second deadliest soccer match in history.

Reports say the disaster started when some Arema supporters who were angry about their team's defeat invaded the pitch, throwing objects. As more and more supporters followed suit, the police fired tear gas into the crowds, both on the pitch and in the stands. A stampede ensued as many people tried to escape the tear gas, but could not find enough exits. The catastrophe has raised safety issues that the government, the soccer association, the police, supporters and the public at large have to take into consideration.

The safety and security of a soccer stadium depends not only on its design and management, but also a stadium risk assessment that requires well-knit coordination among all stakeholders in accordance with the guidelines of FIFA, the world governing body for soccer.

The risk assessment should include identification of where spectators, players, officials and/or other people are seated and of potential tensions between supporters. It should also anticipate unruly behavior among supporters, such as standing on seats, throwing objects, lighting fireworks, invading the pitch and inciting violence.

A contingency plan must be prepared that should include crowd control measures. In its guidelines, FIFA requires all stadiums to have an emergency plan in case a major incident occurs in or around the stadium. It is the responsibility of a country's security authorities to ensure compliance with this requirement.

Consultation must be held between the stadium's security guards, the police, the fire brigade, medical teams, the local government and the event organizer to produce an agreed plan of action for all potential emergencies.

The use of tear gas is very dangerous because it is indiscriminate. Tear gas can harm anyone nearby. Moreover, according to the University of Toronto's International Human Rights Program, there are a few common ways that tear gas can be abused, such as during peaceful demonstrations, in enclosed spaces and against vulnerable populations.

Initial contact with tear gas causes difficulty breathing, vomiting, irritation of the tear ducts and eyes, nausea and chest pain. Prolonged exposure to tear gas could lead to severe injury and even death.

Moreover, Article 19b of the FIFA Stadium Safety and Security Regulations stipulates a prohibition on the use and carrying of firearms and "crowd control gas" by police in stadiums. Failure to abide by this prohibition has proven disastrous, as in the case of Kanjuruhan Stadium disaster.

Soccer supporters are among the most heavily policed social groups in the United Kingdom, believed to be the home of soccer, where they are often subject to routine mobility restrictions, stop-and-search operations and various invasive intelligence-gathering methods.

After fatalities at several soccer matches, the UK increased its security measures under the Public Order Act 1986 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. These regulations restrict and impose criminal

sanctions on soccer supporters who smuggle illegal objects such as alcohol, fireworks and missiles into a stadium, as well as those who invade the pitch.

An interesting approach in the UK was the additional enactment of a banning order that prevents “hooligans” from attending and engaging with soccer matches, and hence keeps them from committing acts of violence and disorder. A violation of this order would result in a criminal offense that could lead to a custodial sentence.

The order also includes a stipulation that prohibits certain individuals from attending regulated matches and imposes a control mechanism that forces spectators to surrender their passports prior to watching a match at a stadium.

The question now is whether similar restrictive rules can be adopted in Indonesia. If not, what options do we have to prevent stadium disasters from happening in the future?

The House of Representatives has been discussing the soccer bill since 2019, but we have not heard of any progress until today. Given the repeated incidents involving soccer supporters and the many lives that have been lost, it is imperative that lawmakers and the government finalize the bill immediately.

While waiting for the House and the government to start the bill’s deliberation, the government must form an independent team to find the truth behind the Kanjuruhan Stadium tragedy. The investigation team should comprise professionals with no ties to the Soccer Association of Indonesia (PSSI), soccer clubs and other parties that were involved in the deadly match.

It is hoped that this team, thanks to their impartiality, will discover the facts that law enforcement needs to ensure that justice is served. After all, no soccer match is worth even a single human life.

...

Haekal Al Asyari teaches at the Gadjah Mada University law school in Yogyakarta and is a doctoral student at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. Yaries Mahardika Putro teaches at University of Surabaya law school.