
'SHOULD WE PROVIDE F16S?' AZERBAIJAN SAYS IT HAS DONE EVERYTHING TO PROTECT HENRIKH MKHITARYAN

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CNN (24 May 2019)

Azerbaijan and Armenia, neighbors and political rivals, have begun to spar verbally over the absence of a leading European footballer from next week's Europa League final.

Arsenal's Armenian midfielder Henrikh Mkhitaryan will miss the May 29 showpiece occasion due to fears over his safety in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have been locked in a century-long conflict stemming from the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917. Both Arsenal and Mkhitaryan decided it was best for the 30-year-old to remain in the UK, while the rest of the squad traveled to Baku for the game against Chelsea.

Mkhitaryan tweeted earlier this week that, "It's the kind of game that doesn't come along very often for us players and I must admit, it hurts me a lot to miss it. I will be cheering my teammates on! Let's bring it home @Arsenal."

That decision was taken despite European football governing body UEFA's "guarantees" -- after speaking to "the highest authorities in the country" -- that the player would be safe.

On Thursday, Azerbaijan's Minister of Youth and Sports, Azad Rahimov, told CNN Sport that there is nothing more his country can do to allay Mkhitaryan's fears given the Azeri government provided more written assurances than on any previous occasion for an athlete entering the country.

"More?" Rahimov said when questioned by CNN Sport's Amanda Davies. "What do you mean when you say more? More than a guarantee? More than 100%? Our feeling and our understanding about the security, we did all that. What more could we do?"

"We can send a private jet for him? Accompanied by two F16 Fighting Falcons ... a navy machine? I don't know what more we could do."

"UEFA and Arsenal received all possible and not possible documentation. From my personal side, I sent a letter and signed the letter with a guarantee from the government, also from the Azerbaijan Football Federation, also from all the government states in charge for security."

'Deep concerns'

However, a spokesperson for the Armenian ministry of foreign affairs, told CNN that "the toleration of racist targeting of Armenians in the Azerbaijani public and the media, and manifest security risks have made it impossible" for Mkhitaryan to travel to Baku.

"The Europa League Final could be a good opportunity for Azerbaijan to live up to its alleged

commitment to keeping politics separate from sports as well as to demonstrate its capacity of tolerance and non-discrimination. This opportunity has been spectacularly missed," said Anna A. Naghdalyan, the spokesman for the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Earlier in the week an Arsenal statement expressed "deep concerns" about the situation and the fact that Mkhitaryan's absence would be a big loss for the team.

"We're also very sad that a player will miss out on a major European final in circumstances such as this, as it is something that comes along very rarely in a footballer's career," the statement read.

However, Rahimov pointed out that numerous Armenian athletes were able to successfully compete in the 2015 European Games in Azerbaijan.

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UEFA has already faced criticism for the paltry number of tickets offered to Chelsea and Arsenal fans for the match. Just 6,000 were supplied to fans of each club in a stadium that seats about 65,000 people.

Those lucky enough to secure a ticket face a nearly 3,000 mile journey to make the final, despite the stadiums of the two London clubs being based less than nine miles apart.

Mkhitaryan's absence and UEFA's decision to award the game to Azerbaijan has also focused scrutiny on the country's human rights record.

Kate Allen, Amnesty International's UK director, said in a statement that it is important Azerbaijan isn't allowed to use the Europa League final to "sportswash" and distract from a crackdown that has seen "journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders being ruthlessly targeted." Rahimov said that those who have come to Azerbaijan will find that the country has a number of opposition newspapers, with no limitation, and all political parties are able to organize.

And in a statement, the country's foreign ministry said that visitors to the country -- whether they be fans or players will see the real situation in Azerbaijan, saying that it will be "the best response to the baseless claims."

<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/24/sport/henrikh-mkhitaryan-europa-league-final-arsenal-azerbaijan-armenia-spt-intl>

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