

GROUPS: RACIST CRIMES ON RISE IN UKRAINE

Reported by: The Associated Press

13/6/2012- Hate crimes are on the rise in Ukraine, a group of human rights organizations said Wednesday, amid calls to boycott European Championship matches because of the threat of racially motivated abuse. Ukraine, which is a co-host of Euro 2012 along with neighboring Poland, has been rocked by accusations of racism and a recent call by a former England soccer to not attend matches here because fans might return "in a coffin." Days before the tournament started, the BBC broadcast footage of racist and violent incidents at recent club matches in Ukraine, including host city Kharkiv. Authorities have responded angrily to the suggestions that the country is racist. Officials have vowed that all fans would be greeted with open arms. UEFA's tournament director in Kiev, Markiyano Lubkivskyi, said Tuesday there have been no reports of racial abuse during the four group matches played in Ukraine so far.

But a recent study of racism and xenophobia conducted by the Eurasian Jewish Congress shows that the number of hate crimes rose from 37 in 2009 to 48 in 2011. "Without a doubt, racism exists in Ukraine," said Maksym Butkevych, of No Borders, a Kiev-based advocacy group. He cautioned that racism wasn't a widespread practice affecting the daily lives of the majority of Ukrainians, but said racial and ethnic intolerance among Ukrainians was growing. "We are seeing a rise in such sentiments and views and this is a worrisome tendency," Butkevych said. Yevhen Zakharov, head of the Kharkiv Rights Group, a leading rights organization in Ukraine, said the rise in xenophobic sentiments can be attributed to a severe economic crisis that has shaken the country in recent years, leading people to blame others for their hardships. "The level of aggression in society has risen. People look for enemies and they find them — not in themselves but around them," Zakharov said.

The activists said authorities rarely punish the perpetrators of hate crimes and often write off such attacks as mere hooliganism because they are harder to prove and victims are often scared to report them, fearing retribution from the attackers and more racially motivated abuse at the hands of police. "The standard reaction of a victim is to lie in bed at home and not tell anyone about" the attack, Butkevych said. Grygoriy Surkis, president of the Ukraine soccer body, said the racism threat was overblown in Ukraine and urged everyone to turn their attention from politics to sports. "There can be individual cases of racism in Ukraine stadiums and that needs to be stopped," Surkis said Tuesday. "But it is important we focus on the most important thing — football ... We should not keep talking about racism in Ukrainian football. The tournament is about football, not politics."

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