

Tuesday, 5 March 2013

Israel football fans angered by Muslim signings, say 'not racism'



Fans from one of Israel's biggest football clubs have shown their anger at the signing of two Muslim players in a recent match, according to media reports this week.

Beitar Jerusalem's fans shunned the signings of the Chechen Muslim players, Zaur Sadayev and Dzhabrail Kadiyev, who made up just two of the five non-Israeli players to ever play for the team.

When 23-year-old Sadayev scored a goal on Sunday, the player was met with boos from parts of the crowd, while "hundreds walked out," British newspaper, the Independent, reported on Monday.

"The reaction to the Muslim players being here is not racist," 19-year-old Akeeva, a Beitar fan, told the newspaper. "But the club's existence is under threat. Beitar is a symbol for the whole country."

"It's just a matter of being Arab [by which he means Muslim]. It's not racism, they just shouldn't be here. Beitar Jerusalem has always been a clean club, but now it's being destroyed –many of the other players are thinking of leaving because of the Muslim players being here," another fan, Jacob, told the paper.

A recent press release from the office of Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who runs the home club of the Muslim Chechen players, stated: "Chechens, like Jews, have a great number of difficult pages in their history and have lived through many tragedies ...We have a lot in common."

Earlier this year, the two players were unveiled to Beitar fans prompting the start of the uproar.

One large banner created by fans in January read "Beitar will always remain pure" and another sign criticized the plan to recruit the two players.

The club were disciplined because of the incident and were ordered to close the Teddy Kollek Stadium's

The Israel Football Association court said the punishment was relatively mild because Beitar had begun to make an effort to stamp out racist behavior among its fans.

Beitar are a bastion of Israel's political right wing and the only leading team in the country never to have signed an Arab player because of fan pressure.

They have the worst disciplinary record in Israel's Premier League. Since 2005, Beitar have faced more than 20 hearings and have received various punishments, including points deductions, fines and matches behind closed doors.

Arab citizens make up some 20 percent of Israel's population of almost eight million. Arab players feature prominently at all other clubs and have long been included in Israel's national team.