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### **England players faced “unlimited” disciplinary action for wearing rainbow armband, says FA Chief Executive Mark Bullingham**

FA boss reveals FIFA pressure on England hours before game, describing governing body’s handling of the issue as “outrageous”

In an exclusive interview with ITV Sport, FA Chief Executive Mark Bullingham revealed that FIFA informed the FA just minutes before they were due to leave for their opening World Cup match that any player wearing a rainbow armband in support of LGBTQ+ rights would face “unlimited” disciplinary action on top of a yellow card.

Speaking to ITV Sport reporter, Gabriel Clarke, in an interview that features in ITV1's exclusive live coverage of England v USA this evening, Bullingham spoke for the first time about the meeting in the lead up to England's opening win against Iran, which ultimately led to captain Harry Kane not wearing the rainbow armband as had previously been expected.

Bullingham said: "It's very important to understand what happened here. We have been clear that we wanted to wear it and we were committed. We announced that we would do that in September, we had a lot of meetings with FIFA over that period and on Saturday before the game we felt we'd reached an understanding where we would wear it. We hadn't got permission but we would face a fine for it.

"Unfortunately then on the day of the game they gave us ten minutes notice - two hours before we were due to go to the game... they came here with five officials and they ran us through a scenario where at a minimum anyone wearing the armband would be booked and face disciplinary action on top of that."

He added: "It was unlimited. They would take disciplinary action against any player that was wearing the armband on top of having a yellow card."

When asked if that could have meant any player wearing the armband could have faced a ban for further games, rather than only a yellow card, Bullingham replied: "That's correct."

Bullingham said it was not clear if the unspecified disciplinary action would have amounted to a points deduction for England.

Bullingham said: "It's not clear though they just said they would take disciplinary action and obviously there's unlimited liability effectively in that action."

When asked to describe the behaviour of FIFA on the day of the game, Bullingham replied: "Again, it's lots of different words we could use and, all I can say, the level of feeling is very high. We are frustrated, we're angry, we thought it was outrageous the way this was handled. That doesn't move us anywhere we wanted to go. We wanted to show our support to the community and were not able to do so."

When pressed to respond to the views of some - including those expressed by ITV pundit Ian Wright - regarding the threat of punishment that there is no protest without risk, Bullingham said:

“I understand that and, look, it’s a valid point of view people have. We felt that we couldn’t put the players in that position - the World Cup which many of them had dreamt of playing in since they were young - suddenly they may not be able to play a part in it. Suddenly they’re maybe facing a ban and that’s not just not a scenario we could put them in.”

When asked about the possibility that one legacy from this tournament may be that in future the World Cup will not be awarded to a country where same sex relationships are illegal, Bullingham said: “I do think that as any bidding criteria you do have to have a basic level of human rights and that’s absolutely part of the discussion that has to be had. And that has to be had at the point that countries bid for the World Cup not a discussion that happens in the build up to it.”

He added: “I agree with the principle that any country bidding for the World Cup should have a basic level of human rights and we have to talk about that.”

“I understand the hurt the [LGBTQ+] communities are feeling and that’s the last thing we wanted to do. We want to show support for these communities and it’s incredibly frustrating to us that we haven’t been able to do so.”

Earlier, during ITV’s coverage of the Netherlands v Ecuador match, a report on the controversy surrounding LGBTQ+ rights in Qatar was shown. This included reaction from people in the UK LGBTQ+ community as well as Dr Nas Mohammed, the only openly gay Qatari national, who now lives in the USA and has campaigned for the legalisation of homosexuality in Qatar and for travelling to Qatar for the World Cup to be “made safe” for LGBTQ+ people.

FIFA says it is confident all necessary measures will be in place for LGBTQ+ fans to enjoy the tournament in a welcoming and safe environment. It says FIFA is an inclusive organisation that wants to put football to the benefit of society by supporting good and legitimate causes, but it has to be done within the framework of the competition regulations which are known to everyone.

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