

▼ A young player at the Dragones de Lavapiés club in the shirt of Real Madrid's Vinicius Jr

PHOTOGRAPH: PABLO GARCÍA SACRISTÁN/THE GUARDIAN



'I never felt I was from here'

Abuse of footballer forces Spain to confront racism

Sam Jones
Madrid

A little after 5pm on Tuesday, a young boy in a Real Madrid strip trotted on to a damp neighbourhood football pitch in the Spanish capital, oblivious to the racism flung at the man whose name he wore on his back and to the national and international debate it had generated.

"We haven't told him about the Vinicius thing yet," said Mohamed's mother, Milene Dos Santos. "If he asks, then we'll tell him. He's only seven, but he'll need to be prepared for what's to come."

It appears the events of the past few days have been too much for many, far older, Spaniards to take in, too. The abuse hurled at Real Madrid's Brazilian winger Vinicius Júnior during a match against Valencia on Sunday has resulted in three arrests. Four other people, meanwhile, have been arrested in connection with a dummy dressed in the player's shirt that was hung from a bridge in the Spanish capital. The 22-year-old footballer,

who was reduced to tears by the latest racist aggressions, said his treatment was proof of just how thoroughly racism had permeated La Liga and Spanish society.

"I'm sorry for those Spaniards who disagree, but today, in Brazil, Spain is known as a country of racists," he said after the match.

His words were echoed by Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who called on Fifa and La Liga officials to take "serious measures", adding: "We cannot allow fascism and racism to seize control of football stadiums."

Those charges have forced Spain's political leaders to position themselves on the issue of racism as people go to the polls in regional and municipal elections on Sunday. The Socialist prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, said "hatred and xenophobia should have no place in football or in our society". Alberto Núñez Feijóo, the leader of the conservative People's party, said racism and sport were "totally incompatible" but added: "Spain is not a racist country in any way."

The campaign-trail platitudes and denials felt rather remote to some of those gathered around the pitch where Mohamed and

his teammates were training in Lavapiés, the diverse Madrid neighbourhood where African and Bangladeshi shops and restaurants rub up against hipster coffee shops. Their neighbourhood club, Dragones de Lavapiés, fields 20 teams made up of about 400 players from more than 50 countries.

Dos Santos, who was born in Portugal to parents from Cape Verde but has lived in Spain for 30 of her 32 years, said she had grown up with all manner of microaggressions, from people touching her hair to repeated questions as to why she spoke such good Spanish. "It's a burden I've carried since I was a kid," she said. "I grew up here but I've never felt like I was from here."



Vinicius Jr spoke out about racism

She and her husband, Ibrahim Ndao, who was born in Senegal, said they were not surprised about the abuse Vinicius had suffered.

"There's systemic racism in Spain and I hope what's happened opens people's eyes to it," she said.

The Dragones de Lavapiés exists to defend and promote diversity and to fight racism and stereotypes. Its president, Dolores Galindo, said while its players and their families had experienced racism on a daily basis, that racism still went unseen by much of Spanish society.

"If you're a white person and you've never experienced it personally, you don't believe in racism," said Galindo, who is white. "Until you spend a lot of time with kids of colour - especially African kids - you don't realise just how often things happen to them."

According to a survey last year, 25% of Spaniards aged 15-29 (the majority of them male) held clearly racist or xenophobic views, with most of their racial hatred directed at Gypsies and people from sub-Saharan Africa and Morocco.

None of this comes as a surprise to Okba Mohammad, a 24-year-old Syrian journalist who has lived in Spain since fleeing his hometown of Daraa during the Russian-backed offensive there five years ago.

"Spain is obviously a racist country," he said. "There's institutional racism, but there's also racism because of the lack of anti-racist education. There are a lot of people who are racist without knowing it or people who are racist because they want to be racist."

Mohammad thinks the poisonous events in Valencia's Mestalla Stadium will soon fade from the public discourse. "But the people who won't forget it are the people of colour who suffer racism and report it every day."

Swiss court clears Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan of rape charges

Angelique Chrisafis
Paris

The prominent Swiss academic and Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan has been acquitted on charges of rape and sexual coercion against a woman in Switzerland 15 years ago.

The lawyer for the complainant immediately announced that she would appeal. The woman, a Swiss convert to Islam, had told the court she was raped on 28 October 2008 in a Geneva hotel. Ramadan, 60, who has advised successive British governments on Islam and society, had denied the charges.

He told the court he wanted to fight against what he called "lies and manipulation" and said he had "never sexually assaulted anyone".

During his final statement in court, Ramadan had asked not to be tried on his "real or supposed ideology" and urged the judges not to be "influenced by the media and political noise". He said: "Forget I'm Tariq Ramadan."

Ramadan was a professor of contemporary Islamic studies at the University of Oxford before taking a leave of absence in 2017 when rape allegations were made against him by several French women, in what was seen as the biggest repercussion of the #MeToo movement in France. He has also denied those allegations, which could go to trial in Paris at a later date.

He left Oxford in 2021 by mutual agreement, on the basis of early retirement on grounds of ill-health. He told the court that he had multiple sclerosis.

The Swiss complainant said she had faced threats and therefore wished to be known under the assumed name of "Brigitte" during the trial. She told the court she had feared she would die during the alleged attack. "I was beaten ... and raped," she said.

She said she had met Ramadan at a book signing in Geneva and later at a conference. A few months later they met for coffee at his hotel after a conference.

Ramadan was acquitted of three counts of rape against Brigitte in his hotel room and one count of sexual coercion. He had been accused of subjecting her to brutal sexual acts as well as beatings.



▲ Tariq Ramadan after a Geneva court acquitted him of rape charges