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# Player, civil violence linked?

## Study: Yellow, red cards reflect countries' conflicts

By [Mark Zeigler](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Sebastian Saiegh is an assistant professor of political science at UC San Diego, specializing in Latin American affairs. He is from Argentina and a big soccer fan, and he spent much of the past month glued to the television watching his beloved Albiceleste succeed and then fail at the World Cup in South Africa.

He also paid attention, with an almost obsessive interest, to something else during the 32-team tournament: the yellow and red cards in the referee's shirt pocket, and when they were raised in the air, and for whom.

Saiegh and two other professors studied the relationship between what, on the surface, may appear to be unrelated events: a yellow or red card on a soccer field in Europe and armed conflict in a country hundreds, even thousands, of miles away.

Their findings: They're very much linked.

Their paper is 26 pages and filled with complex charts and graphs, along with detailed analysis of the data and their various permeations. It recently was accepted for publication in an upcoming edition of the academic journal *Economics & Politics*.

But the basic gist of what Saiegh and co-authors Ted Miguel of UC Berkeley and Shanker Satyanath of New York University concluded is this:

“We find that the extent of a player's home country's recent record of civil conflict is strongly associated with violent behavior on the soccer pitch, as captured in yellow and red cards, but not other dimensions of play, such as goals scored ... We believe that our results are strongly suggestive of a causal link between exposure to civil conflict and subsequent violent behavior far away from the original conflict setting.”

What led them to think there might be such a link?

Saiegh refers to a front-page photo in a Peruvian newspaper before a key World Cup qualifier against Uruguay. It shows Peru star Nolberto Solano pointing a 9-millimeter pistol at a light blue jersey of Uruguay's national team next to the headline: “Matar o morir.”

To kill or be killed.

That's Peru, a country with two decades of civil war or other armed conflict since 1980. And Uruguay, with none.

"People in Uruguay were completely stunned, and people in Peru were like, 'Oh, OK,?'" Saiegh says. "The reaction was so different in the different countries. What was seen as an innocent prank in Peru, people in Uruguay thought these guys were crazy."

If exposure to civil war means violent behavior becomes more socially acceptable, then why wouldn't that translate to a soccer field in crunching tackles or flagrant body blows, the primary reason referees issue yellow or red cards?

Saiegh and his partners collected yellow and red card statistics from six European leagues from the 2004-05 and 2005-06 seasons, involving more than 5,000 players from 70 countries. They compared that to internationally accepted data of civil wars and similar types of armed conflict from 1980-2005, the years that the typical player was alive.

"One of the most interesting projects I've ever worked on," Saiegh calls it.

Overall, players averaged 2.43 yellow cards per season.

Players from Israel and Colombia, two countries with conflicts in all 26 years examined, averaged nearly twice as many (4.80 and 4.79, respectively). One, Colombian defender Ivan Ramiro of Inter Milan, had 25 yellows across the two seasons.

Even when outliers such as Israel and Colombia are removed from the statistical analysis, there still is a noticeable uptick in yellow and red cards in players from nations prone to civil war. And perhaps more interestingly, when the data were compared to other factors — age, position, salary — they found that "civil war exposure predicts violence on the soccer pitch but not other aspects of play."

The study did not include World Cups because the sample size, with only 64 matches every four years, is too small to draw meaningful statistical conclusions. But it doesn't mean Saiegh isn't paying attention to the cards in South Africa. Algeria, with a long history of civil war since 1980, got two reds in three games.

"With the direct exposure of growing up in civil war, certain patterns of behavior seem to be acceptable," Saiegh says. "For somebody who grew up somewhere else, it's unacceptable. But for some people, maybe trying to chase someone from behind and tackling them (in a soccer game) doesn't seem to be that bad because, well, (they've) seen worse."

#### Notable

- Dunga is out as coach of Brazil's national team. The coach and his staff were fired Sunday, two days after Brazil was beaten by the Netherlands in the World Cup quarterfinals.
- Government agencies in South Africa have spent more than 110 million rand (\$14.1 million) on World Cup tickets and related expenses, more than double the amount they had publicly admitted to spending, according to a newspaper report.
- Spain coach Vicente del Bosque said struggling striker Fernando Torres might not start Wednesday's World Cup semifinal against Germany. Torres hasn't scored in South Africa despite starting four straight games.

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The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Sebastian Saiegh, an assistant professor at UC San Diego, is a co-author of the study,

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