When South Africa’s Bafana Bafana stepped onto the pitch against co-host Mexico this week, they were part of a historic moment for African football.

For the first time, 10 African nations are competing at a men’s FIFA World Cup, a likeness of the continent’s growing influence on the global game. From Morocco and Senegal to South Africa and DR Congo, African teams are arriving with greater depth, stronger squads, and higher expectations than ever before.

Yet as Africa celebrates its largest-ever representation on football’s biggest stage, the tournament has also exposed an uncomfortable contradiction: while players, coaches, and talent increasingly move across borders, fans, officials, and even some teams continue to face barriers to mobility.

For decades, African football success was measured by the number of players making it to Europe’s top leagues. Today, the story has evolved.

Many African national teams now rely heavily on diaspora talent, players born and developed abroad who choose to represent their ancestral nations.

Morocco, Africa’s highest-ranked side, arrived at the tournament with a squad dominated by players developed in Europe. DR Congo’s squad includes a large number of foreign-born players, while countries such as Algeria, Senegal, Tunisia, and Ghana continue to benefit from extensive diaspora networks.

At the same time, some of Europe’s biggest football stars are themselves products of African migration. Their families left Africa in search of opportunity, and generations later their children are among the world’s most valuable players.

A recent study by researchers from the World Bank and the University of Bologna described this phenomenon as “leg drain,” arguing that football talent follows migration patterns much like highly skilled professionals. The study estimates that talent redirected through migration and dual-nationality pathways is worth more than €20 billion globally.

For countries such as DR Congo, the researchers argue, the value of football talent developed abroad significantly exceeds the value currently represented within their national squads.

The findings have reignited debate over whether African football is truly capturing the full value of the talent it produces.

While teams increasingly benefit from global migration, supporters and officials have encountered a different reality.

One of the most discussed incidents of the tournament involved Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan, who was selected by FIFA for World Cup duties but reportedly faced entry challenges before the tournament.

The setback drew widespread attention across Africa. When he returned home, Artan was welcomed warmly by supporters who viewed his appointment as a historic achievement for Somalia, regardless of the circumstances surrounding his travel difficulties.

For many observers, the incident highlighted the tension between football’s global ambitions and the realities of modern immigration policies.

Questions have also emerged around visa processing and travel requirements affecting supporters from several African countries hoping to attend matches in the United States.

The issue extends beyond Africa.

Iran’s national team has faced significant logistical challenges linked to travel restrictions and diplomatic tensions. Reports indicate that parts of the Iranian delegation experienced visa-related complications, forcing adjustments to the team’s preparations.

Iranian supporters have also raised concerns about ticket allocations and access to matches hosted in the United States.

The developments have fueled criticism from supporters who argue that a World Cup marketed as a global celebration should remain accessible to all participating nations.

Mobility is not the only concern.

Ticket prices for the tournament have also become a major talking point. For many African fans, attending matches requires expensive international flights, accommodation costs, visa fees, and match tickets that remain beyond the reach of ordinary supporters.

For a Senegalese fan travelling from Dakar, or an Ivorian supporter flying from Abidjan, the total cost of attending a single group-stage match can amount to several months' income.

The result is a growing perception that football's biggest event is becoming increasingly inaccessible to many of the communities that contribute most passionately to the sport.

Despite these challenges, Africa's influence on the modern game has never been greater.

Former Arsenal manager Arsène Wenger, now FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, has repeatedly pointed to Africa as one of football's most important growth regions, citing the continent's vast talent pool and expanding football infrastructure.

Meanwhile, respected football analyst Jonathan Wilson has often argued that migration has become one of the defining forces shaping modern football, influencing everything from player development to national team identities.

Their observations are increasingly visible at this World Cup.

Whether through diaspora stars representing African nations, African-born players starring for European teams, or the continent's expanding presence on the global stage, Africa's footprint is impossible to ignore.

Yet the tournament has also raised a question that extends beyond football.

If players can move across continents to build careers, if national teams can draw strength from global diasporas, and if football itself is marketed as the world's game, should supporters, referees, and officials face growing obstacles simply to participate?

As the World Cup unfolds across North America, Africa's football story is no longer just about talent. It is also about mobility, opportunity, and who gets to be part of the game's biggest moments.

For now, the continent's influence continues to rise. Whether access rises with it remains an open question.