

World Cup Fever closes Costa Rica and much of the world

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

San José, Costa Rica – North Americans who do business internationally might want to take note that the rest of the world will be close to shutting down in the next few weeks.

The reason? The World Cup—a month-long soccer frenzy that captivates the minds and energy of billions of people every four years.

The excitement has been building for months as fans around the world have devoured special newspaper sections, purchased posters of their favorite teams and entered competitions for free trips to Germany for this year's competition which runs from June 9 until July 9.

Enthusiasm is at a fever pitch in much of Latin America where a number of countries have fielded teams and loyalty reflects an inflated national pride.

Street vendors are raking in a good profit selling team pennants and t-shirts as well as trading cards featuring local soccer heroes. Restaurants have prepared special “mundial” offerings and are setting up wide-screen televisions to attract customers during the competition.

Those who can't travel to the games in Germany are preparing their own celebrations and stocking up for game-watching parties.

“It's good for the economy,” said Sara Madrigal, a Costa Rican secretary. “People buy new televisions and video recorders, they stock up on food and beer and get ready for parties.”

Madrigal, who along with most Costa Ricans has high hopes for her team but does not expect them to do well against competitors from larger countries, added that the game's impact on the society is positive as well. “People are friendlier during the games and learn more about their culture,” she said.

The month-long competition is destined to interrupt daily business and government activities, especially in countries whose teams have qualified for the competition.

Nations around the world are adjusting work schedules to allow fans to watch their favorite team. Ukraine's government has asked employers to adjust their work schedules, a university in Bangladesh has postponed exams and Portugal's parliament has rescheduled a debate on a military reform law originally set for the date of their team's match-up with Mexico.

And, Costa Rica's government has given government employees the morning of June 9 off so aficionados can stay home and watch their team's first game against Germany.

Political leaders expect the same procedure to be followed in Costa Rica's subsequent matches.

Local businesses are following suit. "My boss is a North American," said Jimmy Vargas, an accountant. "But he is setting up television sets in the office and has ordered in food so we can watch the game."

"Our store will stay open and the boss said that if any clients come in we will have to serve them," Vargas added. "But, we told him that nobody would be shopping because they will be watching the game too."

As with other sports championships, the unbridled enthusiasm has raised some worries. "Who is going to pay for all of this?," wondered Saul Guzmán, a Costa Rican businessman. "We get paid for our time off, we lose business during the games and the government loses tax income."

In addition to tax losses, the Costa Rican government has budgeted just under \$7 million dollars for television advertising in Europe and North America during the game's broadcasts. The messages will highlight the country's tourist attractions.

Despite his questions, Guzmán said that he too plans on dropping work and watching the games in which his country's team plays.

Police officials say they are worried about an increase in violence. "There is always an increase in domestic violence during any big game," explained Rubén Morales, a police official in the Costa Rican town of Cartago.

And, as if there wasn't enough to worry about, several Costa Rican doctors have warned that people with cardiac or vascular problems are at higher risk for a heart attack or a stroke following a particularly close game.

Meanwhile, in Brazil, whose team is favored to win its seventh world cup championship, power companies are worrying about electrical usage before, during and after the game.

Authorities are planning for a dip in electricity demand before the game as businesses and offices shut down. Then, when millions of television sets are turned on, they expect record high usage that may overtax the ability of the system. And, after the game, officials say they are concerned about the impact of millions of fans opening their refrigerators and warming up food for celebration parties.

Police officials here in Costa Rica are warning taxi and bus operators that they will be fined if police catch them watching the games on portable television sets while they are driving.

While there are no specific laws against operating televisions in public transport, there are prohibitions against objects being placed on the dashboard or in other places that will obstruct visibility.

Not to worry, say most taxi drivers. They expect few taxis to be on the streets during the games and even fewer customers asking for service.

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