

Polokwane: 4 World Cup games to make impact

By Eric Willemsen, Associated Press Writer

POLOKWANE, South Africa — "Sokkerkoors!" read the headline in local newspaper Polokwane Observer on Friday. Football fever!

The atmosphere was building in the smallest of the nine World Cup host cities ahead of its first game on Sunday.

"Finally, after six long years... It's here!" read the frontpage of the daily newspaper Northern Review.

"I can't wait for the tournament to start," said Oniz, a 23-year-old selling newspapers in the heart of the city formerly known as Pietersburg, which has a population of just over 500,000.

"I love football but I also think it's great for Polokwane. A lot has happened over the last couple of years. They built the new stadium, a lot of new roads. It has united us and it has brought new life to the city."

Oniz spoke over the din of traffic in Polokwane's city center. Many drivers keep a hand free to blow their vuvuzela trumpets, and 408 taxis branded with the World Cup logo honk constantly to attract clients.

Polokwane hosts only four of the tournament's 64 matches, starting with Algeria-Slovenia on Sunday, followed by France-Mexico, Greece-Argentina and Paraguay-New Zealand over the next two weeks.

Aside from those with a ticket to Peter Mokaba Stadium, there is a Fan Fest nearby where all World Cup matches will be shown live and which is expected to attract up to 30,000 visitors for games.

The Polokwane Observer estimated 10 Boeing 747s would not be able to hold the amount of food and drinks that will be consumed at the FanFest over the length of the World Cup.

Oniz is eager to visit the Fan Fest to enjoy the event with his mates — old and new.

"I love the World Cup because it gives us the chance to meet new people," he says.

The World Cup has been good to him so far. He has sold all but one of the issues of a local magazine's World Cup special edition.

But will there be a lasting legacy for the city from the World Cup?

"Let's wait and see. I don't know what to expect," Oniz says.

The newly built 45,000-capacity stadium will remain, though Polokwane has no first-division team to play in it.

Roads, plus water and energy infrastructure have been enhanced in a 2-kilometer area around the stadium. And the local airport has tripled its service capacity from 400 to 1200 passengers per hour.

"These are all major important services for the future of Polokwane," says Nдавhe Ramakuela, director of the local World Cup organizing committee. "The World Cup is an opportunity, a big legacy for our city."

The city council expects up to 80,000 visitors on each of the four match days and is urging locals to help build a positive image. "We know our city! Let's proudly promote Polokwane!" reads a huge banner in Grobler Street.

"We should use the event to entrench a culture of pride and self reliance and vow never to undermine our capacity in the human race," Premier Cassel Mathale of Limpopo province was quoted as saying by Northern Review.

Unlike Oniz, Ramakuela has no doubts about long-term benefits for the city.

"The idea behind the event is to make friends — nationally and internationally," Ramakuela says. "We've got a lot of new infrastructure which will help us entering global markets."

The city hosts companies like Coca-Cola and South African Breweries and has a growing financial market.

The director does not think that just four matches is too little to imprint the name Polokwane on an international audience. Cape Town and Port Elizabeth will host eight games each, and Johannesburg has 15.

"I see it the other way round. We've got four matches to showcase to a global audience who we are," Ramakuela says. "That can't be taken away from us. Whether in Mexico, in Germany or in India, we can always say: 'We were one of the host cities of the World Cup.'"

That would mean even more if an African team makes it all the way to the final, and Oniz is sure that will happen.

"South Africa will win for sure," he said with a smile. "We use our vuvuzelas to blow all opponents away!"

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