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FIFA: Under-20 World Cup upbeat despite Turkish demos



The Under-20 World Cup kicks off Friday in Turkey with FIFA promising the tournament will go off without a hitch despite sometimes violent, anti-government protests that have gripped Istanbul and other Turkish cities in recent weeks. Jim Boyce, chairman of the tournament organizing committee, acknowledged that security has been beefed up for the June 21-July 13 tournament. The Northern Irishman said FIFA security experts were comfortable with arrangements for the 16 teams and spectators in the seven host cities and he predicted there would not be any problems with security. "The FIFA security people are very happy with the security situation that exists at present in Turkey," Boyce said. "FIFA is determined that this tournament will go ahead and certainly I sincerely hope the security situation will not be a problem and I can honestly say I don't think it will be." Anti-government demonstrations erupted across Turkey after riot police brutally cracked down on environmental activists who opposed plans to remove trees and develop Gezi Park, which lies next to Istanbul's famed Taksim Square, on May 31. The protesters have expressed discontent with what they say is the gradual erosion of freedoms and secular values during Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 10 years in office. In the past few days, the protests have given way to peaceful resistance although police dispersed pockets of protesters in Ankara and Istanbul on Tuesday night and early Wednesday. Hundreds of protesters stood still for hours on squares on main streets in several cities, mimicking a lone protester who started the trend on Istanbul's Taksim Square on Monday and has been dubbed the "Standing Man." The United States team, which arrived Sunday and is staying in Istanbul, said they had seen no sign of trouble. "In terms of security, we feel secure and we feel we are in a good place and Turkey is a great place to be right now," Coach Tab Ramos told The Associated Press. "There is no reason for us to think any differently. We actually drove 45 minutes across town to get to practice and drove through the whole city. There were no signs other than normal life around here." U.S. captain Caleb Stanko added that there was nothing to worry about. "We feel really safe. There is nothing really scary going on," Stanko said. "At least we don't see any of it. I think my parents are worried. They are not here and they don't actually see what is going on." Organizers have also turned their attention to ensuring the stadiums are filled once the tournament starts Friday with the U.S. taking on Spain and France facing Ghana in Group A. Cuba plays South Korea and Nigeria takes on Portugal in Group B. They said 300,000 of the 1.3 million available tickets have been sold for the tournament. "It's very important the Turkish football public come out and give great support to this tournament," said Boyce, noting this is the next biggest FIFA competition after the World Cup. "I know Turkey for example is very keen on hopefully hosting the likes of the European finals," he said. "Obviously an event like this will put Turkish football on the map and hopefully will help them in their bid in the future to host bigger tournaments such as a World Cup." Local organizers said they were confident more tickets would be sold as the matches drew closer, predicting the total sold would double to 600,000. Predicting a winner is particularly difficult at this edition of the tournament in large part because Brazil and Argentina, which have won eight of the past 10 competitions, failed to qualify. The emerging favorite appears to be Spain, which is looking to add a second Under-20 World Cup to its increasingly crowded trophy cabinet. Having won the Under-19 European championship, it boasts a side that plays the quick-touch "tiki taka" style known for its quick passing and possession. Midfielder Oliver commands the attack while wide men Gerard Deulofeu and Jese - who finished the European Championship as top scorer - are the main scoring threats. The Americans come into their opening match against Spain as underdogs but insist they are relishing the opportunity to face one of the tournament's best teams. "Spain is probably the favorite to win the whole thing and the fact we can start with Spain is a great opportunity for us and for our players to perform and