

THE WORLD SOCCER CUP IS HERE!

During the month of June, all of Mexico's attention will focus on a soccer extravaganza that is half sport, half ritual. What is its social and economic importance for a country in crisis?

For the first time in the 56 year-old history of international soccer championships, a country will get to host the games for a second time.* That country is Mexico.

Teams from twenty-four countries, which have survived arduous play-offs to qualify for the event, will compete in games to be held at 12 Mexican stadiums between May 31 and June 29. They will be participating in the most important professional sports event in the world, the World Soccer Championship, held only once every four years.

Unlike the first time Mexico hosted the games, this time the country is in the midst of the worst economic crisis in its history. Because of the crisis, many people are thinking about the possible social and economic consequences of the World Cup. Some critics ask whether the event will actually help the country's economy, or if it's an unnecessary luxury, or even worse, if it is a means of shifting people's attention away from the country's dire situation.

Some people believe that the international event will launch Mexico on its way to economic recovery. They think foreign investors will be very impressed with the excellent organiza-

* Twelve World Cups have been held up to date: Uruguay in 1930, Italy in 1934, France in 1938, Brazil in 1950, Switzerland in 1954, Sweden in 1958, Chile in 1962, England in 1966, Mexico in 1970, Germany in 1974, Argentina in 1978 and Spain in 1982.

Preparations underway in the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

Ignacio Trellez, a controversial figure, who for over 30 years has worked as technical director of Mexican soccer and was head coach of the country's national team in the World Cups held in Chile and England.

Some of the players also worry that the joys of being a spectator are effectively reserved only for the well-to-do. The people who traditionally flock to soccer games are often from the country's poorer strata. Nonetheless, they will be unable to attend the world playoffs because "admission prices are totally out of reach for people who earn the minimum wage," says Javier Aguirre, a key player on this year's Mexican team and who also has a degree in business administration.

But none of this means that the Mexican government is turning a profit on the people's poverty. In fact, Javier Aguirre admits that the largest profits probably won't go to the government. Over eighty percent of the organization of the event is in the hands of the private sector. One can suppose then, that the profits and benefits will be accrued in a similar proportion.

The Organizing Committee's press office said that the sale of three million tickets (60% in Mexico and 40% abroad) will bring in some \$73 million. But according to Colmenares

Paramo, the real profits are in the sale of television broadcasting rights. As of early this year the privately-owned Mexican television stations raised their price for a minute's worth of advertising for prime viewing time (between 7 and 11 pm.) from 1,200,000 pesos to 1,704,000 pesos (approximately \$3,500).* Programs about the upcoming championship event are already being shown during this time slot. And during the entire month of June it will be the most important time for game-by-game commentary as the play-offs build to the finals.

The games will be transmitted to 122 countries worldwide. Advertising during the games will cost an astronomical three million dollars a minute! This is three times as much as during the World Cup held in Spain in 1982. Those profits will not pour into government coffers, however, but rather into those of Televisa, the corporation that owns the international broadcasting rights.

Sergio Pelaez says World Cup profits will be distributed among FIFA members (Federation of International Football.** Associations), the Mexican Organizing Committee, the 24 participating teams and the Mexican teams that are providing their stadiums for the games.

Estimates are that this year's World Cup games will be viewed by some 9 billion people around the world, according to Arturo Barcena who heads the Organizing Committee's media department. This impressive number of viewers is a large part of what made Mexico want to host the games in the first place. In times of crisis, when some of the media in the developed countries insist on emphasizing the country's negative aspects, it's important to project its positive aspects, as well as the Mexican people's natural generosity. The 1986 World Cup is the ideal means for achieving this.

In addition to all that has been said, the main fear in Mexico, really, is that the national team could be a failure.

Mexico has never been a soccer powerhouse. On this occasion, though, a lot of time and energy have been put into preparing a very solid team. It is not necessarily expected to win the World Cup, but it is expected to reach the finals and at least satisfy its fans with the quality of its playing. Team member Javier Aguirre goes so far as to suggest that the country's social and economic problems could take a turn for the worse if there is a replay of the failure in the last three World Cup series (Mexico was eliminated by tiny Haiti in the qualifying rounds and didn't even get to the finals in 1974; it

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People who suffered damages during the earthquake protest against the world Cup. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

Pelaez also estimates that investments in infrastructure will be less than the costs involved in organizing the event. "We have enough infrastructure: highways, airports, hotels, satellites, security, stadiums. The heavy outlays were made for the 1968 Olympics and the 1970 World Cup. From here on, it's all profits..."

* Obviously there is no comparison between these figures and the cost of advertising on prime time in the U.S. but these are the highest in Latin America with the exception of Brazil and Venezuela.

** "Football" refers here to soccer. The sport is known as "football" everywhere in the world except in the U.S.

ended up in last place in 1978 following an ignoble defeat by Morocco; in 1982 Mexico was once again eliminated in the qualifying rounds, this time by Honduras and El Salvador). But the fact is that the country's present situation can't be changed by the effects of the World Cup. What can change is the nation's morale. "Maybe the Mexican people will be euphoric and take things in stride," says economist Colmenares Paramo. "But if our national squad fails you can imagine how the people will react to price increases in public services or basic foodstuffs."

Others criticize the FIFA for what they call its arrogance and overbearing attitude. "I think the FIFA is the main threat to

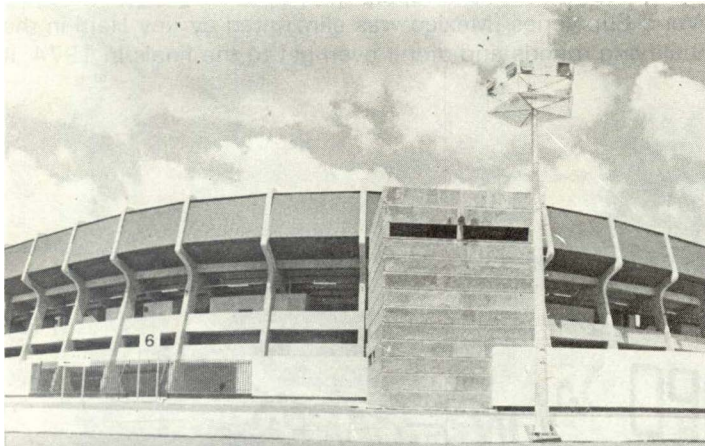
the nation

the Mexican government," says Colmenares Paramo. The leeway allowed to FIFA is "a great political risk" because it has been allowed "states of exception" in monetary and fiscal matters, and even in regards to the infrastructure to be used, claims the former vice-president of the National Association of Economists.

FIFA has "demanded more than is reasonable," says former national coach Ignacio Trellez. And in the characteristic roguish spirit that has earned him more than a few enemies in the local sports world, he adds that from a sociological perspective, the World Cup will be "a kind of circus."

As the opening date for the World Cup nears, some worry about a possible social turmoil such as the one that took place on the eve of the 1968 Olympics. Arturo Barcena for one, dismisses the idea. "Nobody is trying to use the World Cup to erase the tragedy of last September's earthquake nor the effects of the economic crisis we're going through. We're all affected by the crisis...it's different from what happened in 1968."

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The Corregidora Stadium in Querétaro. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

What is certain is that Mexico will go through 30 days of yelling, tears, laughter and embraces. Mexico will once again host an international event that will put us in the global limelight and will attract millions of European and American fans whose affluence and goodwill toward our country is more welcome today than ever before. There is no doubt that as of May 31, the criticism and complaints will die down as thousands in Mexican stadiums and many millions more in front of their television sets yell "Goaaal" in an unparalleled mingling of languages.★

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