

With security tight, Germany gets its party face on for the World Cup
BY DAVID MCHUGH, ASSOCIATED PRESS
June 08. 2006 6:14PM

BERLIN -- An upbeat Germany has kicked off its monthlong World Cup party, buoyed by hopes that tight security and meticulous planning will ensure a tournament that mirrors the country's brightening mood.

Few Germans expect victory: Though a perennial powerhouse, the team is weaker than usual and its star midfielder is injured.

Most realize that hosting sport's most-watched spectacle _ and the first major international sporting event since the country's east and west reunified _ is a chance to burnish Germany's image. And to have a good time.

On the eve of Friday's first game between Germany and Costa Rica, beer tent after beer tent stretched along a Berlin "Party Mile" that included giant TV screens to show the tournament's 64 matches. Dozens of kegs stood stacked on pallets in anticipation of the crowds.

Steffen Koblitz came up from nearby Zossen on Thursday to check out of the party preparations.

"The mood is very good, we're looking forward to it," said Koblitz.

Still, he worried for the home team, which will play its first game without sidelined captain Michael Ballack.

"I hope we don't lose to Costa Rica," said Koblitz, 39. "I hope they make it to the final, but the semifinal is about as far as I think they'll get."

In Frankfurt, a large TV screen floated on the Main River, facing rows of seats on the bank. Workers in Munich's Olympic Park, where Venetian gondolas plied the lagoon Thursday, were preparing for an expected 35,000 visitors.

Munich's venerable breweries can sell their product at the park _ unlike in the stadiums, where the only brews to be had are northwestern Germany's Bitburger and Anheuser-Busch's Budweiser.

Police in Munich said they were bracing for potential crowd trouble.

"All kinds will be meeting up, with nothing to separate them," said deputy Munich police chief Jens Viering. "We are counting on it: There will be trouble."

Separately, officials tightened checks on the border with Poland, an hour's train ride from Berlin. Federal police spokesman Jens Schobranski said Thursday that officers watching for hooligans have nothing significant to report so far.

"We're relatively unworried, especially when you see how the World Cup has almost opened in Berlin and what euphoria people are bringing onto the streets," said Michael Gabriel, who

runs fan programs aimed at curbing soccer disruptions on Deutschlandfunk public radio. "This mood is really the best prevention against violence."

The World Cup opens with indicators of business and consumer optimism running high and the German economy _ Europe's biggest _ picking up after several stagnant years. Economists say the tournament may contribute 0.2 percentage points of the 1.8 percent growth this year. A million foreign visitors are expected to spend a billion euros.

One indicator of the consumer climate rose last month to its highest level since 2001, and an index of business sentiment reached a 15-year high in April.

A new government, led by the country's first female chancellor, is still doing well in opinion polls after six months in office.

In her inaugural weekly video podcast, Chancellor Angela Merkel urged a "top-class performance" on and off the field.

"We all want to show that Germany is capable of top-class performances _ and not just in soccer stadiums," Merkel said. "We are looking forward to guests from every corner of the Earth and we want to celebrate a great festival with them, peacefully and joyfully."

Still, the run-up to the tournament has been marked by several concerns, including issues with the availability of tickets and persistent attacks on foreigners and minorities.

Recent cases of racially motivated violence include an attack on a Turkish-born Berlin state legislator who suffered a concussion after two men shouting anti-Turkish epithets beat him in his east Berlin district. German government officials have vowed that attacks during the tournament will face swift justice.

Stefan Chatrath, a sports marketing expert at Berlin's Free University, said even an isolated incident of racist violence would taint Germany's image if the attack gets extensive coverage by the thousands of journalists here for the event.

"The question is," he said, "how will it be portrayed in the news media?"