

FEATURE-World Cup hosts tackle image problem

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By Philip Blenkinsop

BERLIN, March 7 (Reuters) - Germany aims to sell itself as a modern, vibrant democracy through its hosting of the World Cup, yet fears an invasion of foreign fans obsessed with Nazi-era images.

Dutch replica German World War Two army helmets, albeit in orange, and English T-shirts showing British wartime leader Winston Churchill are not quite what the hosts intended when they launched their campaign "Germany, Land of Ideas", hailing the nation as a breeding ground for composers, poets, philosophers and inventors.

The campaign is in fact aimed more at potential investors than the average football fan, but Germans also want to show they are not just the masters of organisation. The message is that they can party too.

"Germany certainly has established itself when it comes to precision and punctuality. We also need to show we are fun-loving hosts," said an official at the "Land of Ideas" campaign.

A charm offensive, launched by the federal government and tourism groups in December, will seek to encourage fine service with competitions to find, for example, Germany's friendliest taxi driver.

A study into Germany's image commissioned by the government among 11 countries two years ago showed most foreigners thought of Germans as serious and hard-working. Fewer connected Germany with the words "happy" or "welcoming".

MINISTER UNPERTURBED

Quite how welcoming they will be to those in England T-shirts boasting "Two World Wars and one World Cup" is unclear, although Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaueble said recently he was unperturbed by the ribbing the hosts can expect.

"We are looking forward to getting a dose of our neighbours' sense of humour," he said.

"I remember too they have a saying: Football is a game between two teams of 11 men, with Germany always winning at the end," he added, echoing a famous line from former England striker Gary Lineker.

"What we do want is a colourful, fun and exciting festival."

Other people, however, have demonstrated a little frustration with their neighbours' antiquated stereotypes. England and the Netherlands are expected to bring large numbers of fans to Germany in June, with the England contingent likely to number 100,000.

Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has suggested that it is time for the English in particular to rethink their view of Germany.

"If you want to learn how the Prussian goose-step works, you have to watch British TV, because in Germany nobody knows how to perform it," he said on a trip to London.

Goose-stepping is legal, if perhaps frowned on, but visiting fans should be aware that they could be prosecuted for performing the Hitler stiff-armed salute or displaying swastikas or other Nazi symbols, all of which are outlawed.

CUTTING EDGE

For corporate Germany, the image campaign is less about convincing foreigners that Germany has advanced from the Nazi era, than about showing that it is at the cutting edge of commerce and a place to do business.

"Made in Germany" has become a byword for quality but there are fears in the country that traditionally risk-averse Germans are lagging when it comes to inventiveness and turning good ideas into thriving businesses.

Former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder declared 2004 a year of innovation and current leader Angela Merkel has repeatedly said Germany needs to improve conditions to foster new business ideas.

Stefan Chatrath, sports marketing expert at Berlin Free University's School of Business and Economics, said Germany was certainly not at the forefront of innovation in some fields, such as biotechnology, reflected by its modest ranking of 15th in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report.

"We want to think of ourselves where we used to be, but I fear we are not there any more," he said.

Not that Germany will be the only country struggling with an image problem come June.

English fans, viewed by many as binge-drinking hooligans, have launched a supposed charm offensive with T-shirts bearing the slogan "Don't Mention the War", the immortal phrase of Basil Fawlty in classic 1970s British sitcom "Fawlty Towers".

Translated into German as "Nur kein Wort vom Krieg", it remains to be seen whether the hosts will get the joke.

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