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World Cup without succor

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The opening of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil is close at hand. But as several media reported, there have been protests and strikes in several cities across Brazil, and on May 15 there was a big demonstration.

The demonstration by thousands of people — some media reported 4,000 to 5,000 while others said 1,000 to 1,500 — was much smaller than the one in June 2013 when about a million people in 80 cities marched on the street to protest the occasion of the Confederations Cup.

Certainly protesters' claims and demands this time are almost the same as last year's: The \$11 billion budget for hosting the World Cup could better be utilized for other purposes. For example, the cost of renovating the stadium could pay for 200 schools or for realizing a decades-delayed government-subsidy program to construct houses for low-income people.

Even stricter controls and regulations as a result of the sporadic strikes of teachers, policemen and protest actions of small size since last year, accompanied by the arrest of hundreds or dozens of people each time, have failed to eradicate such complaints and criticism.

Observers find something unusual about the current delicate atmosphere of muted unease, noting that this soccer-enthusiastic nation has not yet fully painted the roads green and yellow or festooned them with bunting.

A more welcoming mood may come later. But aside from the worry about the possible danger of violence around the stadium, we have to think of the meaning of the protests with slogans like, "FIFA GO HOME" or "A World Cup Without the People."

In a sense, the protests show that international sports events for the ideal of world peace and friendship — an ideal adopted in the 20th century — may have reached a turning point.

In principle, sports and culture are supposed to play the role of unofficial diplomacy with citizens taking the initiative. International sports competition has given all nations good opportunities for nurturing friendship across borders while awaking mild national consciousness in rivalry.

In reality, people's good will was often exploited and abused by the politics of the day, like the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, which was used as a Nazi propaganda. Excessive national consciousness can turn into chauvinism and become the source of hate crimes.

There are cases in which some countries have boycotted sports games for political reasons, hurting the ambitions of athletes who aimed for better records

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and chilling the sympathetic feelings of their fans.

Besides, it has become a tremendous economic project to host such international events. FIFA has become a huge organization with a wide range of business-related activities, which include getting sponsorships from the big companies of many countries, managing the sales of related commodities and services, selling rights to broadcast the games, etc. Further, international sports events provide a great opportunity to develop large-scale tourism.

This time, in Brazil about 600,000 foreign visitors are expected to come to the soccer event and 3 million domestic fans are to travel to see the matches. All of them need accommodation, meals and transportation. For the sake of these visitors, buildings, public spaces, stations and roads need to be renovated to increase comfort, and signs and signals need to be renewed to improve understandability.

Hospitality costs a lot of money and often squeezes the budget used for social welfare. (Japan used the concept of *omotenashi* in its effort to get the right to host the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.)

In addition, the experience of countries that hosted major international sports events shows that most facilities constructed for the events are of no use after they are over. Construction of such facilities often means destruction of the environment and pulling laborers out of places where they are indispensably needed, as well as the so-called gentrification or expulsion of poor people from cities, which takes place rather violently.

For these political and economic reasons, international sports events have become a severe burden on host coun-

tries. Enough of such slapstick!

Vietnam recently issued an official statement saying that it will withdraw as host of the 2019 Asian Games for financial reasons. It said that although the event could possibly promote its economy, it also could have an opposite effect, and that 80 percent of its people are against taking the risk.

Despite strong opposition to the 2014 World Cup by many Brazilians, this decision by the Vietnamese government won't be emulated by Brazil, not least because the soccer event is to start soon. But a "courageous retreat" is a worthwhile consideration.

In Brazil, even more severe control measures than before would not stop protesters as they say that they intend to draw the attention of global media.

As the government tried to silence their criticism and stop their actions in order to maintain its prestige, they began to utilize global media as messengers of their voice to their own government, showing Brazil's failure as the host and as a "democratic" country.

It would be an unbearable shame for the government, but more importantly, no sports events are enjoyable if they do not generate happiness of passive "participants" of the host country.

Countries trying to host major international sports events in the future need to keep in mind that they will have to take the risk of facing the same problems as Brazil has experienced if they ignore the priority of the policy programs their governments must carry out.

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