

South African army on high alert for World Cup
Malaysiakini.com
Mar 26, 2010

South African soldiers will be on high alert during the football World Cup, the army boss said Thursday, as the government voiced concern about violent protests during the tournament.

The military will also begin patrolling the national borders on April 1, taking over the duty from police as part of a broader security realignment meant to allow police to focus on fighting crime, Lieutenant General Solly Shoke said.

"We are ready to help where needed with the World Cup," Shoke told reporters in the capital Pretoria.

"All army leave has been cancelled over this period. We will be on high alert," he said. "We will be there in support of the South African Police Services."

"This World Cup is not about security. It's about enjoyment. People must be allowed to come here and enjoy the soccer. We don't see any threats" to the tournament, he added.

The border patrols are part of South Africa's push to prevent trafficking in drugs or people, particularly as the World Cup's June 11 kick-off nears.

South Africa last week proposed its first direct legislation to target trafficking, with maximum sentences of life imprisonment and a one million rand (136,000 dollar/101,000 euro) fine.

The new law will not be in place before the World Cup, but South Africa will train police to use existing legislation to tackle trafficking, said Ngoako Ramatlhodi, chair of parliament's justice committee.

"Anticipation of an increase in trafficking, especially for sexual purposes, ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, has focused attention on South Africa's ability to deal with trafficking," he said in Cape Town.

The government on Thursday also expressed concern at the risk of violent protests during the four-week tournament.

South Africa has been rattled by a series of demonstrations over the last month, with impoverished communities demanding access to basic services and the powerful mini-bus taxi industry protesting a new public transport system.

Street protests are a common feature of South African life, but some recently have been marred by shootings, arson and stonings.

"Obviously we are concerned," government spokesman Themba Maseko told journalists.

"The violent and destructive nature of some of the protests is unacceptable," he said.

"We do not want to see these demonstrations, especially during the World Cup, when the country's attention and focus should be to be the best host ever for the 2010 FIFA World Cup."

The protests were "a symptom of accumulated discontent" over basic services like piped water and housing in poor neighbourhoods, he said.

"Our primary concern at this stage is the use of violence. The burning of libraries and other public facilities, destruction of property, we think is an unacceptable way of raising concerns in a democratic state," he said.

"The most ideal situation is obviously for a lot of these challenges or problems raised by communities and the taxi associations to be resolved well ahead of the World Cup. Obviously, that's our first prize," said Maseko.

Many of South Africa's protests are less dramatic.

About 100 members of the South African Disability Alliance on Thursday burned three wheelchair tyres near the Soccer City stadium, venue of the opening and final matches, to complain about poor handicap access at three stadiums.

World Cup boss Danny Jordaan received their petition and said organisers would meet with the group, according to the Sapa news agency.

"If there are issues, we need to sit down and talk them out," Jordaan said.

- AFP

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