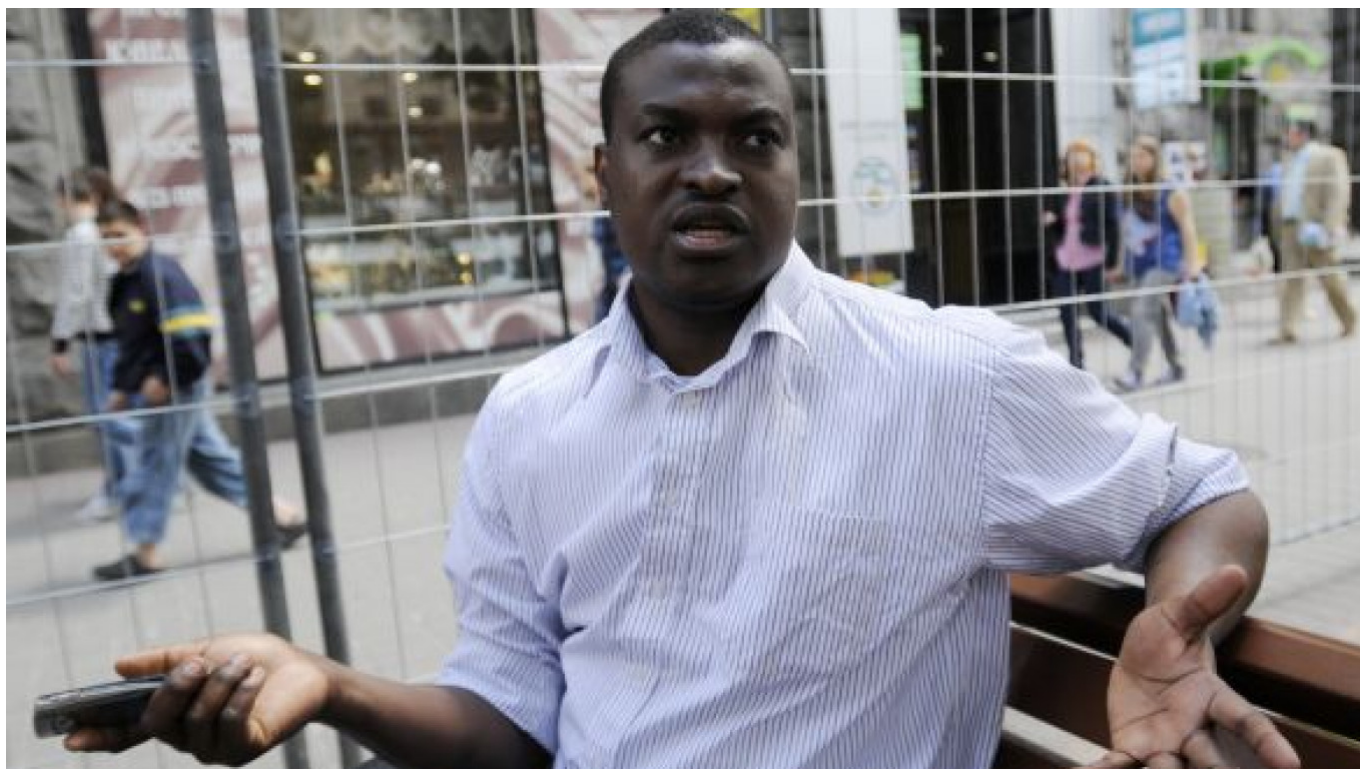


Euro 2012 Leaves Ukraine Rocked by Racism Controversy

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Victor Chikelu, a Nigerian student in Kiev, says fans shouldn't avoid Euro 2012 in Ukraine out of fear of racism. **Sergei Chuzavkov**

KIEV — Victor Chikelu, a Nigerian medical student, was punched and told to go back to Africa by a drunk in the Kiev subway two years ago.

But he, like other Africans who have suffered racist abuse in Ukraine's capital, has a message for soccer fans: Don't boycott Euro 2012.

"I don't think this should prevent the fans from coming down," Chikelu said. "People just need to take precautions, and everything should be fine."

He points to the absence of fatal attacks in the past two or three years as a sign that perhaps the situation is improving. Still, he plans to leave the country as soon as he graduates next year.

A tall and muscular man, Chikelu said the memory of the attack haunts him whenever he's out

in public.

"I have gotten used to this feeling. ... If I notice anything, I am always ready to run," he said, sitting by Kiev's main avenue.

On Friday, it will turn into a fan zone. Big screens and people from all over Europe will crowd the area as the soccer tournament, co-hosted by Ukraine and Poland, kicks off.

With just days to go until the tournament, Ukraine has been rocked by accusations of rampant racism.

A British documentary showed thugs in one of the Euro 2012 host cities violently beating dark-skinned supporters of the same team during a domestic league match. And former England player Sol Campbell warned fans to stay at home or risk coming back in a coffin.

Ukrainian officials were outraged by the comments. The country has many sins, but racism isn't one of them, they said. They are vowing that foreign fans will be safe and will have fun.

Experts and ethnic community leaders paint a different picture. They said that several dozen ethnically motivated attacks take place here each year and that authorities are reluctant to investigate and punish the perpetrators and protect the victims.

Dark-skinned students feel uncomfortable in public places, avoid public transportation and prefer to hang out in groups.

"If we talk about physical attacks and cases of hate crimes, it's definitely a problem in big cities," said Iryna Fedorovich, an activist for the Kiev-based advocacy group No Borders. "If we talk about xenophobia, it's everywhere."

But while racism exists in Ukraine, it's not so rampant that foreign visitors should be scared of coming, community leaders say. In fact, they believe that hosting a major international event will attract attention to the problem and promote diversity.

"Racism is a problem in Ukraine, but I don't think (Campbell) was right to say that you will return in a coffin," said Charles Asante-Eboa, President of the African Center in Ukraine, which unites tens of thousands of Africans working and studying here.

"(Fans) will come, they will be happy, and they will go away with a lot of memories and nostalgia for the welcome they will receive in Ukraine," Asante-Eboa said. "I am sure Ukraine will meet them with open arms."

The accusations of racism — and Campbell's comment in particular — have caused outrage and disbelief here. Authorities say Ukraine is being slandered by people who've never been to the country.

"I am sure nothing is going to happen. We all need to calm down and return to reality," Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleh Voloshyn said.

Ukrainian authorities are so confident of a peaceful tournament that police officers won't mix with fans during the games and will be discreetly positioned a few minutes away from the

action.

"We will have a normal, safe atmosphere for foreign citizens," said Oleh Motveitsov, an Interior Ministry official charged with security. "Ukraine will be hospitable."

"The only piece of advice I have for foreign fans to avoid problems is not to get into trouble, not to get drunk and not to get involved with people they don't know," Motveitsov said. "Better to stay together as a group than going alone in dark back alleys."

Chikelu painted a grim picture of being an African in Ukraine. Like many other African students, he chose Ukraine's top medical school for his education because it costs him a relatively cheap \$5,000 per year.

But he said that his female colleagues stay in their dormitories after dark and that men tend to drive in cars or take taxis to avoid racist confrontations.

Another Nigerian student, Olaolu Sunkalmi Femi, appeared in court this week to face attempted murder charges after he fought back against an attack by five Ukrainians in what he says was a racist crime.

Fearing for his life, he fended off his assailants with a broken bottle, and some of them suffered light cuts, his defense team says. If convicted, he faces a minimum of 10 to 15 years in prison and up to life.

"We hope that the court will do justice, but the very fact that he's accused and in jail is lamentable," said Maksym Butkevych, a No Borders human rights activist.

Most observers here agree that boycotting Euro 2012 would be a bad idea. Chikelu said many of his Ukrainian friends are unaware that racism is a problem in their country, and he added that being exposed to people from different cultures and backgrounds will boost tolerance.

"Their coming is an instrumental way to solve the problem," he said. "Staying away doesn't help it."

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