

NINA MOINI: Thousands of people from the Ethiopian community will be in the Twin Cities for a soccer tournament hosted by the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America. But the event is more than just a soccer tournament. Starting Saturday, Minnesota will be host to the largest gathering of Ethiopians anywhere outside of Ethiopia, making the event a cultural celebration too. Joining me now is Elias Meles who's on the board hosting the tournament. Thanks for being with us, Elias.

ELIAS MELES: Thank you for having me. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: 43 years of this tournament. That is amazing. And I understand every year, it's hosted in a different city. Would you tell us about just the tournament's history?

ELIAS MELES: Yes. So ESFNA was established back in '84, 1984, by four teams from DC, Boston, California, and Houston, Texas. And now it has 32 teams. 12 of them from East Coast, including two teams from Canada, 12 from West Coast, and 8 from Midwest.

NINA MOINI: Wow. So when you are looking for cities to choose, how do you choose them? And how did you choose Minnesota?

ELIAS MELES: Oh, that's a great question. Like I said, we have 32 teams. The team, they have a proposal that they're going to bring to the board members. And the EC will make a decision based on the hotels and field and other cultural things that has with the tournament, such as, in that specific city, how many Ethiopians there are and that kind of things.

And then the proposal will be represent to the board members and that the EC will make a decision. This year, here it is. It's in Minnesota. We are very happy to come here. And by the way, Minnesota was chosen back in 2020. But unfortunately, the COVID hit. So it didn't happen. So the tournament had be canceled. But six years later, they got this opportunity again. And we're very happy to come over here.

NINA MOINI: How many people are you expecting for this event over the week?

ELIAS MELES: We are expecting more than 20,000 people.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

ELIAS MELES: Yes. This is not including the teams. We have 32 teams. Each team has 27 players. If you multiply that by 32, it's over 800. And we don't count kids because they don't pay. They get in for free.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

ELIAS MELES: Yes. And all board members and other staff, they get in for free. So we are expecting more than 20,000 people all over the world. By the way, people are coming from back home, from Ethiopia, from Europe, Canada, and Australia.

NINA MOINI: And the tournament itself is going to be at TCO Stadium there in Eagan, the Vikings' practice facility. There's going to be food and vendors. What else can people expect if they're not necessarily going to be watching soccer, but they still want to spend time with loved ones?

ELIAS MELES: Absolutely. Absolutely. A lot of people are gathering here to celebrate this festival. Actually, ESFNA's event is much more than just a festival. It's the largest African-Ethiopian cultural and food festival of its kind. It's offering attendees an authentic taste of food from Africa-Ethiopia, as well as other humanitarian nonprofit business.

We have three different type of vendors. Food vendor, a dry goods, and nonprofits. So we have about 30 vendors that are selling different type of authentic foods. We have dry goods that they're selling. Cultural clothings and souvenirs that are present in Africa, and Ethiopia specifically. And also we have a nonprofit church and foundations. They're showing their kids what they're doing and their religion and anything.

So a lot of people are gathering for that matter. Soccer is on top of it. And the main thing is for people to gather, and people coming from different places, like I said. So there are people who have not seen for many, many years and they meet there. So it's more than just a soccer, it's just more than a festival. It's a big, big cultural event.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And as I'm sure you know, for anyone who doesn't, Minnesota has a larger East-African population, a larger Ethiopian population in particular. What are you seeing or enjoying about the local Ethiopian cuisine here and the community?

ELIAS MELES: Yes. Not only Minnesota, like you know. Chicago is not far from here. There are a large Ethiopian community there. And Canada also. So people are coming from nearby. But also people are traveling from all over the places. So it's very exciting.

We're going to have a concert performing. Very, very high professional Ethiopian singers coming and performing. We have a concert here in Omni Hotel. That's where we're staying at. So people are so looking forward for this event.

NINA MOINI: All right. Elias, thank you very much for sharing with us. And wishing you a wonderful time this weekend. Thank you so much.

ELIAS MELES: Thank you so much. I just wanted to say one thing.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

ELIAS MELES: That the mayor-- oh, I'm sorry, the governor of Minnesota, Tim Walz, has declared July 3 to be Ethiopian Day. And I really, really wanted to emphasize and say in behalf of the ESFNA that we are very delighted about that and we are very, very happy. And we are looking for all East-African people to come out and then celebrate this day with us. And thank you so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Elias Meles is on the board of the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America. The tournament starts Saturday the 27th and goes through July 4.