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Milan and İzmir take off gloves for last rounds of Expo 2015

Monday, February 4, 2008

Dennis REDMONT

MILAN, Italy - It is time for the next-to-last gong.

This time İzmir and Milan have taken off their gloves, and it is bare knuckles.

Listen and look at Vittorio Sgarbi, the brilliant and poisoned-tongue "culture czar" of Milan.

Here is his punch, speaking in public: İzmir has "bought" some of the recent "new voters" on the black market and when the fight is over next March 31, Turkey will emerge with its first universal Expo for 2015.

Il Giorno, the Milan newspaper, this weekend, projected that İzmir commanded 68 secure votes and Milan only 51 out of a total of 140 countries who are signed up at the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE), the selection board.

The BIE now has 140 members and each vote follows a political decision by the government of the member countries. Il Giorno alleges that Turkey courted 15 Islamic nations out of 42 recently joined members and thus now has a slight edge on stylish Milan.

Over the weekend, about 200 delegates have flown to Milan from Paris in chartered flights for a two-day visit and symposium at the Science and Technology

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Museum, today and tomorrow.

Italy will use the same "weapons of mass attraction" as it always has: The three "F"s: Football (Inter Milan which they saw play Sunday), Fiat (to drive delegates around) and Food which is the official theme of the Expo 2015 in Milan: "Feeding the Planet, Energy for life. Working Together for Food safety, food security and Healthy Lifestyles." Of course, the fourth "F" remains as a reserve: Fashion, where Milan is king.

The family of Mayor Letizia Moratti owns the football team Inter. So, that is a help to use the team as part of the PR campaign.

But Mrs. Moratti now has a problem. First of all, her political party is that of Silvio Berlusconi, Forza Italia and that party is out of power.

Secondly, Moratti does not even have a central government to rely on. Italy's lame duck center government, which lost a crucial confidence vote Jan. 24, cannot devote its entire energy to campaigning for 2015 Expo.

Romano Prodi, and his 103-minister cabinet has been asked by the president of Italy to stay on the interim while very complex political maneuvering takes place, likely to take the country to an snap election sometime in the spring.

Recent opinion polls have given media tycoon Berlusconi a lead between 9 and 15 percentage points to return to power. But the problem is that President Giorgio Napolitano would like to reform the current proportional representation electoral law before the polls take place. So negotiations drag on.

Nevertheless, Moratti will be joined by acting Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema, Cultural Minister Francesco Rutelli and Foreign Trade Minister Emma Bonino at most of the events, including a concert at the prestigious La Scala Monday night.

The Italians also have convinced Jacques Attali, the think-tank guru who gave President Sarkozy ideas to reform France a few weeks ago, to lecture the BIE delegates on the environment of the Expo - which happens to be İzmir's theme. Italy is also boasting that it has just now enrolled Brazil as one of its supporters to endorse its final battle for votes.

Expo has crucial importance

Both Milan and İzmir depend vitally on the Expo for projected government investments: Up to 1 billion euros for road construction, new real estate and 100,000 new jobs for whichever city wins bid. Milan's food-based candidacy includes building a "Citta del Gusto" (Food City) and a new tele stock market to foster agri business trading, besides new fair grounds.

But Turkey may be lucky: If it floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee, it can beat Italy, which

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an interim government, an asphyxiating economy and a distracted population, worried about globalization, immigration and taxation in its daily life.

Even at Milan's Malpensa Airport, the intercontinental hub is being slowly dismantled as near-bankrupt Alitalia waits interminably for a takeover bid from Air France to be completed and the airline sells its airport slots to other airlines to cover the Italian company's losses.

İzmir will have its last chance to convince the BIE delegates in 10 days time when the Turkish government organizes a similar official visit, another advantage for Turkey's third city. Because the final stop in Paris on March 31 and the vote will take place with fresher memories from the Aegean port city's presentation.

For those who follow the competition as a prize fight, here is the current score from Milan's Il Gazzettino newspaper: Total votes in favor of İzmir: 68, in favor of Milan 51, Undecided 21.

The newspaper divided the votes into two camps: Historical members of BIE and newcomers.

In the first group (historical members) İzmir had 46 votes, Milan 39 , undecided 13.

Among the 42 newcomers, İzmir received 22 votes, Milan 12 and 8 were undecided.

This is a game where every single country's vote has the same value, be it Cyprus, Togo, Antigua and Barbuda, Russia or China.

So from now on, the battle is to woo the small countries.

For the moment, Turkey seems to have an advantage.

Another eight weeks will tell if it can hang on.

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