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World Youth Day organizers expect attendance bump from Argentine pope

by Lise Alves by Catholic News Service

World Youth Day 2013

Sao Paulo — Members of the local organizing committee for World Youth Day say with the recent election of an Argentine pope, they expect up to 2.5 million young people at the international event in Rio de Janeiro.

"We currently have 200,000 pilgrims already registered, but registrations go on until the last day of the event," said Carol de Castro, press coordinator for the local organizing committee. She said the committee expects 800,000 pilgrims to have registered by the start of the event, which runs July 23-28.

The Vatican has not announced the exact dates Pope Francis will attend but has indicated it will be his first international trip.

Castro said though registration is not required for most of the events planned for World Youth Day, is it recommended, since with the registration pilgrims will have access to free transportation to many of the events, help in finding accommodations and will receive a pilgrim's kit with important information about the event and the city. If the pilgrim has opted for the packages that include meals, a list of accredited restaurants will be included.

Argentines make up the largest group of foreign nationals chosen to be volunteers during the six-day event, although volunteer registration had already closed when the name of the new pope was announced in late March. Approximately 15 percent of the 60,000 volunteers chosen are from Pope Francis' birth nation.

Organizers say they expect that, by July 23, more than 1 million beds will be made available for pilgrims

in family homes, schools, recreational centers and churches. The pilgrims will be able to stay free of charge in these locations from July 21-31, said Vinicius Arouca, volunteer on the hosting committee.

Officials say security in Rio de Janeiro should be tighter than normal in June and July, since the city is also hosting the final of the FIFA Confederations Cup 2013 at the end of June.

For security, Brazil's Ministry of Defense has made available 8,500 armed forces members. The ministry said these and an expected 4,000-5,000 police officers will patrol areas where pilgrims will visit. During the vigil July 27, the Brazilian army will patrol Rio's air space.

The Brazilian government is easing visa requirements and exempting pilgrims from paying visa taxes for those who can prove they have registered for World Youth Day. According to press officials at the Ministry of Foreign Relations, pilgrims will only have to submit their valid passport, passport-size photo and proof of registration -- such as a letter from their diocesan group stating they are going -- to obtain a special visa to attend the event. There will be no need to show a return ticket, proof of income and other information usually requested by Brazilian authorities to obtain a normal visa.

Although most European and Latin America nationals do not require a visa to enter Brazil, pilgrims with passports from countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan will require visas.

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