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## World Cup tickets available for fans

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By Gerald Imray

Johannesburg - World Cup organisers still have 355 000 tickets to sell in the eight weeks leading up to the tournament as they continue to sacrifice short-term profits for the sake of long-term benefits and a better image for South Africa.

Officials will be relieved that 145 000 match tickets were sold in the first four days of the final sales phase.

But more sales are needed if Fifa, the sport's world body, are to avoid a PR disaster - the sight of empty seats at stadiums.

Organisers have been forced to offer cheaper tickets to ensure all 11 World Cup stadiums - and not just those staging the most popular games - are full.

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"I think that today there is one challenge that we definitely have to work on," Fifa secretary general Jerome Valcke said ahead of the fifth and final ticket phase. "It's to make sure all the stadiums are full and that we are selling all these tickets."

The final ticket push has no effect on Fifa's bulging coffers, with the \$3.3-billion it makes from commercial rights and official marketing ensuring a substantial return for world football's leading organisation.

"Let's be clear," Valcke said recently. "The World Cup in South Africa has no financial problems for Fifa."

But what of Danny Jordaan's local organising committee, and South Africa itself?

Match tickets are a "key revenue stream" for a World Cup's local organisers, according to Udesch Pillay, of the Pretoria-based Human Sciences Research Council.

Pillay is editor of the book, *Development And Dreams, The Urban Legacy Of The 2010 Football World Cup*, the result of a five-year study into the long-term impact of the World Cup.

He notes that the local organising committee of the Germany World Cup in 2006 made a profit of \$237.5-million, "partly due to the near-capacity sales of match tickets".

South Africa 2010, because of a unique set of factors, may not be able to maximise this revenue stream as other hosts have done.

Sluggish ticket sales are one thing.

But of the tickets that have been sold, many have been to poor South African fans at discounted rates - and that further reduces the organisers' profit margins.

"We know our fans are poor," Jordaan, the chief local organiser has said. "So we have decided to accommodate them."

And the country's fans have been accommodated.

Category-four tickets, the cheapest and reserved exclusively for South Africans, range from \$19 for a group game to \$142 for the final. They are the cheapest World Cup tickets in recent history.

In South Africa, there is no other way if organisers are to avoid rows of empty seats on television broadcasts beamed to a global audience of 26-billion people.

The country has an unemployment rate of around 27 percent. The average monthly income is estimated at \$372 but, in truth, the country's most loyal football supporters are poorer. They rarely pay more than \$2 to watch a local match.

After Fifa finally caved in and put tickets on sale over the counter, instead of the ill-fated Internet-based system, fans have responded.

But the response has been, unsurprisingly, toward games involving the South African team, Bafana Bafana, and high-profile countries like Brazil, Argentina, world champions Italy, England and Germany. Match tickets have moved much quicker in the economic hub of Johannesburg, and the tourist-focused coastal cities of Cape Town and Durban.

What of the matches involving less popular teams, like Slovenia and Algeria, in more remote destinations like the northern town of Polokwane, or Port Elizabeth in the poorer Eastern Cape?

"I hope foreigners will assist us in filling up those stadiums," said Malin Fisher, a fan from Johannesburg who queued overnight in Soweto to buy tickets at one of the 11 centres opened last week.

"The economy of the people in certain areas won't allow them to pay the steep amounts that they would need to pay."

So far, though, foreign fans appear unwilling to help.

Fifa figures following the fourth phase of ticket sales show positive signs from the United States, which leads the way with 118 945 tickets sold.

But the US is the only positive, with fans in the United Kingdom only buying 67 654 tickets at the last count. Just 32 269 have been sold in Germany.

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The vice-president of the national football association in Japan expressed frustration over the slow pace of ticket sales in that country last week.

"Disappointing," said Fifa and the LOC, in reference to the international ticket sales.

Now, the initial hopes that 450 000 foreign fans would flock to South Africa are certain be dashed by the global economic downturn and fears over South Africa's high crime rate. Around 350 000 - even 300 000, according to some - is a more realistic figure.

Match, Fifa's ticketing and hospitality partner, has recently given up around 500 000 bed nights in South Africa during the tournament.

Big-spending corporate visitors are also not expected to arrive in large numbers. Valcke acknowledged in February that only half of the high-priced hospitality seats in the luxury suites had been purchased. And Fifa would not say how many tickets of the final 500 000 to go on sale were returned by its commercial partners, only that it was a "significant number".

It all suggests that the tourism bonanza South Africa had been hoping for - and, in the case of the LOC, relying on - has been exaggerated, says Pillay.

And South Africa had made big plans for it.

It has spent \$1.3-billion on stadium building and upgrading, including \$366-million alone on Cape Town's stunning Green Point Stadium.

Add to that an estimated \$1.5-billion on Johannesburg's Gautrain light rail transport system and \$90-million on security, including new helicopters and body armour for the police.

The country has also upgraded seven of its airports, and built an eighth, the King Shaka International Airport in Durban, from scratch.

All this has added significantly to South Africa's public debt, in the hope that the long-term investment will pay off.

In many ways South Africa has reacted to the World Cup like Fisher, the 32-year-old trainee church minister from the south Johannesburg suburb of Riverlea, who spent over R10 000 on tickets after waiting 16 hours for his chance.

"There are no words to describe it," Fisher said after claiming two tickets for the final.

"I've spent a couple of rands, more than I planned, but it's all worth it. Wow. What an amazing feeling." - Sapa-AP

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