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The pessimistic and the defensive jeopardise SA's 2010 ambitions

SEPP Blatter, Fifa president, has not helped placate continuing international concerns as to whether SA will be ready to host the 2010 World Cup.

In a recent BBCI television programme, Blatter made the point that contingency plans were in place, should SA be unable to host the event.

He qualified this by saying that these plans would only come into play in the event of a natural disaster.

"We definitely must have a possibility to go somewhere else ... other countries are ready to organise the World Cup," he said.

The US, England, Japan, Germany, Spain, Mexico and Australia were cited as possible alternatives.

The BBC programme, rather than Blatter's remarks, drew immediate indignation from the African National Congress and the government, with the broadcaster being accused of communicating deliberate falsehoods about our country.

Indeed, a BBCI programme a few months ago on the crime situation in SA, which was considered by many to be well researched and objective, drew similar criticism.

Blatter's comments are irresponsible. You do not give a press briefing one day, reiterating confidence in the current plan and affirming how positive Fifa is feeling about progress being made, and then appear on a global television network the next day, telling millions of international viewers that Fifa has contingency plans in place.

Why the Fifa head felt the need to say this is extremely puzzling. He knew full well that such a comment would serve to perpetuate the cycle of doom and pessimism that is being voiced across the world about SA's capabilities, from international journalists to those high-powered global capitalists who sit on President Thabo Mbeki's Interna-

Business Day
22/5/07



2010
COLUMN

tional Investment Council.

Not surprisingly, major international newspapers like Bild, El Pais, the Washington Post, L'Equipe and the China Post ran with the Blatter story.

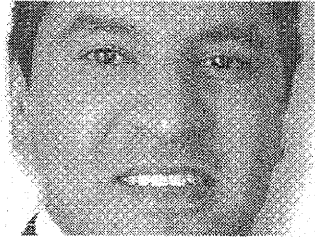
Clinton van den Berg, a South African sports columnist, recently articulated some of the interna-

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tional concerns, pointing out that some of his colleagues in Europe remain "unenthusiastic" and "distrustful". They cite capacity, crime, and Afro-pessimism as key concerns. He noted that, despite the South African situation being occasionally misrepresented, his colleagues are regular folk asking reasonable questions. They sometimes have doubts, not all of which are unfounded.

The debate above should not be articulated in zero-sum terms. It needs to be framed, rather, around more appropriate and responsible forms of communication and information flow.

This is where the government, and the Local Organising Committee (LOC) in particular, have fallen short of expectations. It



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makes no sense for Danny Jordaan (or the government spokesman Themba Maseko) to get ticked off and overly defensive every time they see a documentary on crime, or a programme that casts aspersions on our ability to deliver ahead of 2010.

Conversely, the international community, and journalists in particular, must be careful not to misrepresent events and exaggerate situations. Newspapers sell and the temptation to reinforce perceptions of Africa as a continent not yet capable of performing on equal terms in the global economy is tempting.

For SA, the dangers of distorted representations are obvious.

They could compromise our major goals of alleviating poverty, reducing inequality and becoming more globally competitive.

The stakes are high. Clearly the government and the LOC's briefing sessions (and other communications) on 2010 readiness — despite all their good intentions — are not sufficient. Their reach seems to be limited and their impact uneven.

On the other hand, journalists and other big stakeholders are not tapping into the right sources of information, are not engaging the government and the LOC more directly, and are being overly dependent on flimsy pieces of information.

This engagement needs to change urgently. Influential journalists and big foreign-based capital can increasingly become important lobby points, not least for doom sayers. If this happens, we may still see the World Cup here in 2010, but in a tarnished guise.

An international, LOC-driven summit on a workable 2010 communications strategy beckons. The government's recent attempt, under the auspices of its Communication and Information Systems, has failed dismally, underscoring the need for an urgently convened 2010 communications summit.

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