

Miles of smiles to greet the world in 2010

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Grinning ability was one of the key skills that Fifa looked for when they picked 4000 Confederations Cup volunteers from 38000 applicants.

On that score, SA has no skills crisis — and a sea of million-dollar smiles was on show at Nasrec on Friday, where Johannesburg's 1000-strong volunteer team assembled for the first time to begin their training.

But the volunteer teams for both the warm-up tournament and the 2010 World Cup will be anything but decorative.

"Without volunteers, it would be impossible to stage a World Cup," says Christian Stiegler, who managed 1400 Munich volunteers at the 2006 World Cup and has been monitoring various 2010 projects for the past year.

The volunteers will work at the coalface of every aspect of both tournaments: media and marketing, ticketing, accreditation, transport, IT, language support, administration and logistics.

Stiegler says SA's volunteers are "much friendlier" than the German team he managed.

"They are also less resistant to advice, and their commitment is amazing," he says. "But attention to detail will be a challenge."

The daunting task of translating abundant enthusiasm into excellence falls to volunteers programme manager Onke Mjo, a charismatic woman who was visibly elated that the process has finally begun.

"We are all a family now," she said, to tumultuous applause from the volunteers — who span the full spectrum of races and ages, though most are in their early twenties.

Ellis Park stadium manager Andrew Dipela told the volunteers that they will be "spiritual shareholders" of the World Cup. "You will be ambassadors of SA and Africa, explaining the beauty of the country, and you will also be moving signboards, dealing with all kinds of queries from fans."

Dipela also warned them not to be tempted into bending Fifa rules. "People are going to take chances with you, to go into areas they are not allowed to go, and they will offer you a shilling and a coin," he said.

For the first time in World Cup history, the volunteers will receive a stipend on their work days — R80 a day. They will get free meals and uniforms, and many stadium-based volunteers will get to see some decent live football while on duty.

"Soft skills will be critical," says Stiegler. "If a fan can't find his seat, and it's half an hour to kickoff, and he has paid thousands of dollars for his ticket, you can't say to him 'I can't help you'. If you can't help, you need to take him to someone who can."

And smile.