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One Year Before Rio Olympics, Shaky Preparations Raise Social Questions and Calls for Accountability

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On Aug. 5, the one-year countdown began toward the opening ceremony of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, the first Olympics ever to be held in South America. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes, and International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach marked the occasion in a gala ceremony in Rio. In a briefing with the press, Paes admitted to worrying about the city’s preparation but mounted a strong defense that Rio would reach the finish line. Bach affirmed that there is "still pressure" on the Rio 2016 Committee to deliver the venues as promised, while Rousseff declared, "Rio will be the most beautiful setting for the Olympics since ancient Greece."

The countdown ceremony put into sharp relief the ongoing major concerns around Rio’s preparations, both the Olympic infrastructure and the impact of Olympic development on the social makeup of the city. Comparisons with Rio’s predecessor, London, have revealed the extent to which the Brazilian host city lags behind in percentage of venues complete. Government watchdog agencies have requested a full accounting of expenditures thus far because of cost-overrun fears. Recent test events have highlighted public health concerns in the waterways hosting aquatic and sailing events, as well as at the equestrian center.

Human rights groups, in turn, used the one-year mark to summarize the major social impacts of the multiyear run-up to the games. They point to the high number of forced evictions of favela residents living in proximity to venues and rising real estate prices that have squeezed the middle class. The billions that will be spent on the Olympics will not deliver basic needs for sanitations, health care, and public education, activists claim (NotiSur, March 9, 2012).

Race against the clock

At the one-year event last month, a giant digital clock ticked down from 364 days, 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 seconds until the Olympics begin. The status report for venues indicated the main Olympic Park overall is 82% complete, although the velodrome and tennis center are still less than three-quarters ready. The overall readiness rate for venues across the four clusters, including the Olympic Park and three other major sites, stands at around 60%, while London was at 80% one year before the 2012 Games.

The golf course is nearing 100% completion but is mired in controversy as the course is built inside a nature reserve. Legislation was changed to allow for a new golf course, financed by the construction of adjacent high-rise luxury housing, on such a sensitive environmental site. Public defenders attempted several legal roadblocks to prevent the course’s construction but were ultimately defeated. Marcello Mello, a biologist and environmental activist with Rio’s Occupy Golf movement, calls it "an environmental crime."

The Olympic Park is in the Barra da Tijuca neighborhood, on Rio’s west side, and organizers are relying on a subway extension to move people between the venue and Zona Sul, where most of the
hotels and many other venues are located. In July, Rio’s Tribunal de Contas do Estado, the audit court, released a report declaring a "high risk" of that line not being ready in time for the Games. Should it not be functioning by August of next year, the Rio Olympics will be a logistical nightmare as the highway between Barra da Tijuca and the rest of the city regularly bottlenecks during daily rush-hour traffic. In response, Rio de Janeiro state Gov. Luiz Fernando Pezão guaranteed the line would be ready. "The work is progressing. We’ll deliver everything on time,” he said, claiming the auditor’s report was based on old information from 2014.

Fear of delays and facilities not being ready on time plagued the preparation for the 2014 World Cup (NotiSur, Feb. 7, 2014). Paes has stridently resisted that interpretation of Rio’s Olympic preparations. At the one-year event, he claimed, "We want to show that we are capable of doing things on time, that Brazil is not a country where everything ends up overbudget, everything ends up late."

However, both the Tribunal de Contas da União (TCU) and the Ministério Público Federal, exercising their rights as federal watchdogs of the Olympic preparation, have requested financial statements in an effort to improve transparency. Last year, a representative of the TCU asserted that the oversight body’s goal was to avoid a "free for all" in Olympic spending. A recent study by Oxford researchers found that Olympic Games since 1960 historically have averaged 252% higher actual costs than estimated in their bid documents. Rio’s R$22 billion (US$5.7 billion) budget when bidding for the games has since ballooned to an authorized budget of R$38.7 billion (US$10.1 billion).

Virus testing the water
The most recurrent issue as Rio has begun hosting test events concerns water quality. On Sept. 1, Rio 2016 Committee and Brazilian Olympic Committee president Carlos Arthur Nuzman confirmed that local waters would be tested for viruses, which have caused health problems for some athletes. This decision comes as an about-face following weeks of denial by Brazilian Olympic officials, who have insisted that reports of polluted water were exaggerated and did not concur with tests conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO).

On Aug. 14, the WHO denied ever advising against tests and reiterated its public call for Brazilian officials to test the water daily in advance of, and during, the Olympic Games. This call echoed that of several sports governing bodies, including for rowing and sailing. Already some countries have pulled out of test events because of water-quality concerns.

The affected waterways include the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, where rowing will take place; Copacabana Beach, home to the triathlon swim and aquatic marathon; and Guanabara Bay, the sailing venue. The latter has been a particular sticking point as Guanabara Bay has long had a reputation as the dumping ground for raw sewage and trash. Efforts to clean up the bay date back to the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio, but, despite loans from international development banks and repeated promises from city and state leaders, less than half the wastewater flowing into the bay is treated at sanitation plants. The city had promised to reach 80% by the Olympics, but Paes admitted in his recent press conference about preparations that the city would not reach that mark.

Social legacy or social impact?
Rio’s inability to clean its waterways represents one of the major missed opportunities for an Olympic legacy that would benefit everyday residents. The bulk of the Olympic venues, many
of which are for sports that are not popular in Brazil, are likely to become white elephants with little practical use following the Games. However, Rio 2016, like all Olympics, must have an official "social" legacy. The original social legacy of the 2016 Olympics was the Morar Carioca urban-upgrading program, which promised to provide basic services to all favelas in Rio by 2020. That program was later scrapped by the city government, and the legacy was formally changed to urban mobility—the network of bus rapid transit and subway extension that would move visitors between the venues and, in theory, improve congestion and public transportation in Rio.

In light of the Olympics’ impact on the city, the community-reporting project Rio On Watch launched its own one-year assessment ahead of the games. It documented a major underinvestment in basic services, noting not only the dire figures for sewage treatment but also the cost in lives, especially for Rio’s poorest who live in favelas near rivers running with sewage. This despite promises from federal, state, and local governments through the massive infrastructure investment of the Programa de Acceleração de Crescimento (PAC).

The Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora (UPP) program, part of the major security overhaul in Rio to combat organized crime and gun violence ahead of the Olympics (NotiSur, Sept. 27, 2013, and May 9, 2014), has led to repeated school closures in certain communities, thus denying citizens their constitutional right to education. A lackluster social services program, UPP Social, later rebranded Rio+Social, has failed to deliver on promises to couple police presence with improved access to city services.

Finally, the massive expenditure on Olympic infrastructure has yielded projects that do not respond to community needs, such as aerial cable cars as mass transit. In turn, new public investments in infrastructure have raised real estate values, which, coupled with the forced eviction of favela residents to public housing far from jobs, has remade the social landscape and abetted private construction interests.

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