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Gregory Scruggs

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Rio de Janeiro Faces Challenges on Eve of Brazil’s First Olympics

by Gregory Scruggs
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The Summer Olympics Games, which will open on Aug. 5 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s second largest city, will mark the first time the international sporting event lands on South American soil. On the eve of the opening ceremony, however, Rio faces a series of social, political, economic, and environmental issues that will potentially affect the execution of this mega-sporting event. As costs have mounted and criticism has poured in, the city’s Olympic legacy may be tarnished before the competitions even begin.

When Rio was first awarded the Olympics in 2009, it already faced hurdles with regards to transportation infrastructure, public safety, and water quality. Having embarked on ambitious efforts to remake the city’s transit networks, police favela communities long beholden to drug traffickers, and clean up the city’s polluted waterways, those efforts are now wobbly. Meanwhile, an economic downturn, massive public debt, an epidemic of the mosquito-borne Zika virus, and a political crisis that may result in the impeachment of the president have all added to Rio’s misfortunes (NotiSur, March 9, 2012, Sept. 11, 2015, and Feb. 19, 2016).

“[The Olympics are] a missed opportunity,” Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes said in an interview with The Guardian newspaper. “We are not showcasing ourselves. With all these economic and political crises, with all these scandals, it is not the best moment to be in the eyes of the world. This is bad.”

The Olympic games come to Brazil two years after the country hosted the 2014 World Cup just as its economic rise was starting to crest. Massive spending on stadiums, security, and other infrastructure soon revealed severe financial mismanagement that, coupled with a drop in commodity prices, has sent the economy into a tailspin in the last two years. Predictions that the US$13 billion spent on hosting the World Cup—the most ever by a host nation—would yield investment and increased tourism revenues have not panned out (NotiSur, Feb. 7, 2014, June 20, 2014, and Aug. 1, 2014).

“The World Cup generated a lot of interest but no lasting business,” Salvador Saladino, head of the Brazilian Incoming Travel Organization, told Bloomberg News in January 2015. Indeed, even the immediate bump in employment on account of hosting the event, as predicted by Brazilian officials, did not occur. Instead, in June 2014, the month the World Cup began, the Labor Ministry reported the slowest rate of job growth since 1998.

While the US$9.7 billion spent on the Olympics have shored up the economy in Rio, it will have little impact the rest of Brazil, where municipalities continue to face looming debt crises as the national economy contracts for a second straight year, according to World Bank predictions. And while Paes defends the investments in Rio ahead of the games as improving the lives of the city’s poor residents, critics see them largely as benefitting the elite, especially those in the Barra da Tijuca neighborhood where much of the Olympic activity will take place.
Old challenges

Of all the challenges that Rio hoped to tackle via the Olympics, transportation was at the top of its list. Every Olympic bid must include a “social legacy,” which for Rio was initially going to be infrastructure improvements to the city’s 1,000-odd favelas, but was later switched to a new transit network for the city. The numbers were impressive: 150 kilometers of bus rapid transit lines planned, a downtown light rail, an extension of the subway system, and the proposed largest bike lane network in Latin America.

However, the results have proved uneven. The expansion of Rio’s subway to the Barra da Tijuca neighborhood, one of the city’s fastest growing residential areas, has been promised since the 2007 Pan-American Games first put Rio on the world sporting map. Later promised again for the 2014 World Cup, the extension finally opened just days before the games—but it has to be manually operated and is accessible only to Olympic ticketholders. There are plans to shut it back down for maintenance after the conclusion of the games.

Only 120 of the proposed 150 kilometers of bus rapid transit lines were completed in time for the games, with the concluded ones focusing on moving people into and out of Barra da Tijuca. The line that would serve the Avenida Brasil, the heaviest-trafficked corridor in the city, remains under construction.

Bus rapid transit is considered a cheaper and easier-to-build form of mass transit than a rail or subway system. However, the geographic orientation of the system has raised suspicions of its real purpose: to move cheap labor into and back out of the Barra neighborhood for the benefit of its wealthy residents. One of the neighborhood’s largest landowners and developer of the Olympic Village and Olympic Park, Carlos Carvalho, told The Guardian last year that his hope was for the Olympics to create “a city of the elite, of good taste.”

Meanwhile, an analysis of the proposed bicycle network by Rio-based geographer Hugo Costa determined that the route serves the more affluent, less dense parts of the city, rather than the bulk of the population. To add insult to injury, a portion of the new route along the Atlantic Ocean collapsed in April, killing two.

New woes

In June, the Rio State government, which is responsible for public security and the new subway line, declared a “state of calamity” with respect to its finances. On June 17, the state government issued a statement that it could not “honor its commitments towards the achievement of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio in 2016.” Detailing the risks, the statement warned of a “total collapse of public security, health, education, transport, and environmental management.”

Analysts anticipate Rio State’s current deficit of R$10 billion (US$3 billion) will balloon to R$19 billion (US$5.8 billion) by the end of the year. To temporarily staunch the pain, on July 28 the federal government issued the state a R$800 million (US$243 million) line of credit in order to finish crucial infrastructure projects that are near completion.

Meanwhile, the effects of the financial crisis have trickled down to everyday Brazilians. Over 137,000 retired state employees did not receive their pension checks in April. Police and firefighters,
protesting a series of missed paychecks, held up signs outside Rio’s international airport in June that read “Welcome to Hell.”

On the environmental front, athletes continue to fear the water-based competitions in Guanabara Bay, where the majority of Rio’s untreated sewage ends up. Despite promises made after the 1992 Earth Summit held in the city to treat sewage before it washes into the bay, the bay continues to serve as Rio’s dumping ground. Scientists recently discovered “super bacteria” in the fetid waters where the Olympic sailing competition will take place.

With the challenges piling on, the final verdict of Rio’s legacy has already come in as negative for some researchers, including urban planner Orlando Santos Jr. of the Universidade Federal Fluminense. “Rio is already a very unequal city,” he said, summarizing the findings of a 190-page report to which he contributed. “After the games, it will be even more unfair and segregated. There will be more wealth in a few areas, but no improvement for most people.”

According to the People’s Committee for the Cup and the Olympics, 77,206 Rio residents have lost their homes as a result of World Cup or Olympic related infrastructure

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