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As Games near, challenges still loom large

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U.S. Olympic Committee CEO Scott Blackmun wants the world to take the Rio Games in stride. “Every Games has not one but a handful of crises, and Rio is no different from Sochi or London or Vancouver in that respect,” he said in a recent interview.

But veterans of multiple Games call Blackmun’s take spin, and while mainstream news coverage of Rio is hyperbolic at times, the rare confluence of problems surrounding the host city is anything but routine.

“Certainly as we’re narrowing in on opening ceremonies, the set of challenges surrounding the Rio Olympics is probably more complex than we’ve seen in some time, perhaps since Athens,” said Adam Lippard, head of global sports and entertainment consulting at GMR Marketing, which is working with 11 clients in Rio.

Taken one by one, each specific issue — the loss of accreditation for Rio’s anti-doping lab, infrastructure readiness, pollution, crime, the Zika virus, political turmoil and an economic collapse — is unlikely to upend the Games. But the sheer variety of ways things could go wrong have those preparing for Rio on edge.



“Every Olympic city has its share of difficulties, whether it’s drivers not understanding bus routes, routes being changed, difficulties getting through



“Every Olympic city has its share of difficulties,” but Rio de Janeiro has continued to add potential problems in the run-up to the Olympics.

Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

security ... but this one promises to have more of those challenges,” said Tom Shepard, a partner at 21 Sports & Entertainment Marketing.

In fairness to the Rio Games, much of what is written at this point in the cycle is filling the classic pre-event media vacuum. With

no competition to cover yet, even minor issues are being dissected at length, not unlike the opening days of NFL training camp.

Take the Zika virus. Medical experts widely agree the risk is extremely low. But still, Zika presents a different sort of dilemma, because it’s a little-understood virus and not easily solved by increases in manpower, money or a new strategy.

“If history serves us well, it is inevitable that the Games will be challenged with one concern or another,” said Michael Lynch, head of North American consulting at Repucom and former global sponsorship marketing head for longtime Olympics sponsor Visa. “However, the uncertainty and ignorance surrounding Zika feels a little bit different this time around.”

Every Olympics veteran interviewed for this story expects Rio 2016, the IOC and Brazilian government officials to rise to the occasion. Blackmun does too.

The track record backs them up; profoundly troubled Olympics like the 2004 Athens Games and the 2014 Sochi Games were fine, if a bit blotted around the edges. Rio has hosted the 2014 World Cup, the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup, the 2007 Pan Am Games and the 2013 World Youth Day, all without major incidents.

But two factors that have emerged in Brazil since those mega-events have even the most optimistic thinking differently: The deep economic recession and the upcoming impeachment trial of President Dilma Rousseff and turnover in other crucial government jobs.

“We’ve never been in a situation where the national government has been in the process of changing its leader during the times of the Games. That’s different,” said Anita DeFrantz, an IOC member since 1985 who otherwise

praised preparation for athletes and media.

In June, Rio officials requested \$2.9 billion in federal aid to help operate basic public services, and interim Gov. Francisco Dornelles said the Olympics could be a “big failure.” Also, a Rio police union spooked the world in late June when it unfurled a banner at the main airport reading “whoever comes to Rio will not be safe.” The overall Brazil economy contracted 4 percent last year.

Olympics veterans say security doesn’t worry them. Threats of crime or terrorism have hung over many past Olympics, including London and Sochi, and the national government, IOC, and private security forces brought by sponsors and teams combine to overwhelm the Games with protection.

But public services don’t end with police. When money is tight, there are many ways the local government can fall down on the job, said one veteran hospitality and tourism consultant. “What about the garbage? They’ll have security forces, but what if they’re not picking up garbage? You know how much garbage a big house generates every day?” said the consultant, who was not authorized to speak publicly by her employer.

The economic crisis makes for a powder keg, Shepard said. “We don’t know what we don’t know in terms of political unrest,” he said. “Which is concerning when the world comes to a country and you take the high-end clientele to the country.”

To Lippard, the combination of political, economic and social challenges stands out historically. Sochi had terrorism and geopolitical problems, but no shortage of money. London had traffic and security concerns, but a fundamentally strong local infrastructure and economy. “This one, the confluence of those three things happening in such direct proximity to the Games, it’s not like this is happening four years out,” Lippard said. “It’s really happening in real time as we move right into the opening ceremonies.”

Ann Wool, partner and managing director of Ketchum Sports and Entertainment, agreed “there are always skeptics beating the disaster scenario drum,” but Rio faces some fresh challenges. For instance, Wool has never packed DEET insect repellent before.

“But, I will say, Rio is no different in that we always go to great lengths to ensure we scenario plan for any eventuality and as yet, we haven’t seen anywhere close to a worst-case scenario come to pass in my Olympic Games experience,” she said. “I sincerely hope this holds true in Rio.”

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