

In Brazil, Pan Am Games Gaffe Stirs Anti-American Sentiment

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RIO DE JANEIRO, July 9 — The Pan American Games do not start until Friday, but the United States delegation has already found itself in a controversy after a phrase that Brazilians considered prejudiced and demeaning appeared on a message board at the American media center here.

“Welcome to the Congo!” were the offending words written on a white board, photographed by a Brazilian journalist and published by the principal daily newspaper in Rio, O Globo, last week. The publicity has led to an outpour of anti-American sentiment, which has not been assuaged by an American press aide’s explanation that the comments were meant as a reference to a heat wave here and nothing more.

“It’s really unbelievable,” the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, César Maia, said in a telephone interview Monday. “He’s scored a goal for the opposition, right at a time when the image of the United States and its government, for the reasons we are all aware of, is highly unpopular, and the United States is trying to improve that image through sports. The U.S. wants to show it is not an imperial country, and along comes this guy to exacerbate that image.”

More than 5,500 athletes from 42 countries and dependencies are scheduled to compete in more than 30 sports during the 15th Pan American Games, which will conclude on July 29 and are viewed as one of the last significant international events before the 2008 Olympics next summer in Beijing.

The United States delegation consists of more than 600 athletes and about 300 support personnel, with Puerto Rico sending a separate delegation of more than 200 competitors.

[Brazil](#) spent more than \$1.5 billion on preparation and new facilities — including construction of new stadiums, arenas and an athletes village — and was sensitive about any suggestion that its performance was substandard. Brazilian government and civic officials are hoping that a successful staging of the games will strengthen their bids to win the 2016 Summer Olympics for Rio and the FIFA World Cup throughout Brazil in 2014.

In addition, Brazilians have historically reacted with vehemence to anything they have seen as attacks on their dignity and self-respect, especially when the United States has been involved. [Ronald Reagan](#) was roundly criticized when he visited Brasilia in 1982 and offered a toast to “the people of Bolivia.”

When “The Simpsons” television program broadcast a satirical episode in 2002 portraying Rio de Janeiro as full of wild animals, street criminals and sexually voracious residents, a formal protest campaign was mounted here.

“With respect to your phrase, typical of Americans who have serious problems with world geography, a piece of advice: GO BACK HOME!” one irate Rio resident wrote in a letters column published by O Globo. “You’re not welcome here, or in the Congo either.”

The United States Olympic Committee has responded to the incident by issuing a formal apology “to the people of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro for the regrettable actions.”

Copies of the statement, which was translated into Portuguese by the American Embassy, have been sent to the Brazilian Olympic Committee, the games’ organizing committee, the Pan American Sports Organization and Maia.

“We are honored to be guests in Brazil and look forward to what we know will be a spectacular Pan American Games,” the statement said. “The actions depicted in O Globo are completely inconsistent with the

expectations we have of every member of our delegation and will not be tolerated.”

In addition, Kevin Neuendorf, the employee who was photographed working at his desk in front of the message board, “has been dismissed from the delegation and sent home,” said Darryl Seibel, a spokesman for the [U.S.O.C.](#) But when asked if the O Globo account that named Neuendorf as the author of the offending phrase was accurate, Seibel declined comment, saying, “We have nothing to add beyond the statement.”

Maia said American athletes could probably expect to hear additional boos as a result of the gaffe, especially in sports where the two countries are traditional rivals, like basketball. But he said American diplomats and delegation leaders had acted promptly and deftly to defuse the situation by issuing the apology. He said no additional security for the United States delegation would be needed or provided.

“I’ve met with [F.B.I.](#) agents on this, and what they are worried about is symbolic acts of terrorism, like someone trying to bring a plane here or some fanatic throwing a bomb,” he said. “They are not worried about this, nor should they be.”

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By [LARRY ROHTER](#)
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When a hunter or woodsman gets lost in the jungle, he often blames the curupira, a mischievous red-haired elf who has feet that face backward and takes delight in making trails that lead travelers astray. And when an experienced navigator inexplicably disappears or drowns in calm waters, he is usually said to have fallen victim to the iara, a cross between a siren and a mermaid.



[Enlarge This Image](#)

Photo Researchers

Scientists link the current mapinguary legends to the Megatherium, one of the largest mammals ever. It vanished thousands of years ago.

“If you’re a rubber tapper and you’re returning to camp empty-handed, you’d better have a pretty good explanation for your boss,” said Marcos Vinícius Neves, director of the government’s department of historical and cultural patrimony in Acre State, where a statue of a mapinguary has been erected at a public plaza here in the capital. “The mapinguary is the best excuse you could possibly imagine.”

Mr. Souza, the writer, counts himself among those who believe the mapinguary is a myth. The deforestation of the Amazon has accelerated so rapidly over the last generation, he argues, that if the creature really existed, “there would have been some sort of close encounter of the third kind by now.”

Partly for that reason, most zoologists scoff at the notion that it could be real.

The giant ground sloth, *Megatherium*, was once one of the largest mammals to walk the earth, bigger than a modern elephant. Fossil evidence is abundant and widespread, found as far south as Chile and as far north as Florida. But the trail stops cold thousands of years ago.

“When you travel in the Amazon, you are constantly hearing about this animal, especially when you are in contact with indigenous peoples,” said Peter Toledo, an expert on sloths at the Goeldi Institute. “But convincing scientific proof, in the form of even vestiges of bones, blood or excrement, is always lacking.”

Glenn Shepard Jr., an American ethnobiologist and anthropologist based in Manaus, said he was among the skeptics until 1997, when he was doing research about local wildlife among the Machiguenga people of the far western Amazon, in Peru. Tribal members all mentioned a fearsome slothlike creature that inhabited a hilly, forested area in their territory.

Dr. Shepard said “the clincher that really blew me away” came when a member of the tribe remarked matter of factly that he had also seen a mapinguary at the natural history museum in Lima. Dr. Shepard

checked; the museum has a diorama with a model of the giant prehistoric ground sloth.

“At the very least, what we have here is an ancient remembrance of a giant sloth, like those found in Chile recently, that humans have come into contact with,” he said. “Let me put it this way: Just because we know that mermaids and sirens are myths doesn’t mean that manatees don’t exist.”

Even so, the mystery of the mapinguary is likely to continue, as is the search.

“There’s still an awful lot of room out there for a large sloth to be roaming around,” Dr. Shepard said.