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Cost concerns loom for pope's Brazil trip

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NCR Today

World Youth Day 2013

Rome — Pope Francis carries enormous advantages into his first overseas trip next week to Brazil, including high levels of global popularity and the natural enthusiasm generated by being history's first Latin American pontiff.

In the run-up to July 23-28 World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, however, there are also signs the outing won't be problem-free. Brazilian media are reporting concerns about cost, both in financial and ecological terms.

The *O Globo* newspaper reported last week that government officials have declined to cover a possible funding shortfall caused by low registration numbers while in at least two cases, controversy has been stirred in environmentally sensitive Brazil by efforts to cut down trees to accommodate World Youth Day events.

Especially in a country already on edge because of a wave of recent popular protests, sparked by outrage over public spending on events such as the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, such developments could complicate the pope's reception.

O Globo reported that registrations for World Youth Day were expected to be in the neighborhood of 1 million to 2 million, with participant fees covering at least 70 percent of the total estimated cost of \$140 million.

Participants are being asked to pay fees ranging from \$51 to \$283, depending in part on whether they attend the full week of events or just the concluding vigil and Mass with the pope.

As of early July, however, only about 320,000 registrations had come in. The newspaper account said organizers had asked federal, state and city officials in Rio de Janeiro to provide \$13 million in additional assistance, which they declined.

The three levels of government already committed to spending roughly \$50 million in security and logistics for the weeklong event and an additional \$10 million in transportation subsidies.

Counts provided by bishops' conferences in countries that typically send large delegations confirm that registrations are below previous totals.

In Canada, for instance, the bishops have reported that 1,153 Canadians will attend the event in Rio, which is 5,000 fewer Canadians than attended the 2011 World Youth Day in Madrid and 800 below the total that traveled to Sydney in 2008.

Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, a noted media figure who's coordinating the Canadian delegation to Rio, said the high cost of the event coupled with concerns about security may have played a part in the lower totals.

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Rosica also said the interval of two years since the last World Youth Day was too short, calling for "a longer waiting period."

In the United States, a bishops' conference official told *NCR* that registrations for Rio number 9,500, down from 29,000 Americans who went to Madrid in 2011 and 15,000 for Sydney in 2008.

Organizers caution, however, that not everyone registers in advance, and total turnout is generally considerably above the official registration numbers.

In an effort to head off possible backlash over cost, organizers in Brazil released estimates Monday projecting that World Youth Day will pump \$220 million into the economy of Rio de Janeiro and provide 20,000 jobs for the duration of the event.

Officials also said after-the-fact analysis of the 2011 World Youth Day in Madrid showed it generated a \$476 million benefit for the Spanish economy and provided 5,000 jobs.

Whatever the final bill for World Youth Day, it's certain to be far below the estimated \$12.7 billion the Brazilian government is reportedly spending on the 2014 World Cup, mostly in outlays for upgrading soccer stadiums across the country.

Meanwhile, space-clearing efforts in two World Youth Day venues that involved plans to cut down trees have also sparked concern.

In the Serra da Tiririca national park, 334 trees were reportedly removed from an Atlantic rainforest in order to accommodate a gathering of some 800 youth from the diocese of São Sebastião de Itaipu prior to the pope's arrival.

The deputy mayor of the city of Niterói, where the forest is located, complained to local media that church officials had not sought permission.

"The incident is lamentable," Axel Graef told reporters. "An event for youth should be educational and demonstrate a commitment to the environment and the future. This removal is a criminal act."

Diocesan officials have promised to replant the forest once the event concludes.

In a separate incident, World Youth Day organizers earlier this month asked Rio de Janeiro's city council for permission to remove 11 coconut trees from a section of a beach where Francis is due to say Mass.

The council initially approved the request, but public outcry forced the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Paes, to reverse the decision.

Some observers believe ferment over cost and environmental impact could draw World Youth Day into the broader discontent that recently erupted in Brazilian streets.

"New demonstrations could take place during World Youth Day, an event that turns the global spotlight on the country and mobilizes its social structures," said Paulo Henrique Martins*, president of the Latin American Sociology Association.

Church officials, however, have played down those concerns while also stressing support from the Brazilian bishops for the basic thrust of the protests in favor of greater investment in jobs, health care and education.

In early July, the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* published what it claimed was a private remark by Francis calling the Brazilian protests "just and coherent with the Gospel." While the Vatican has never confirmed the remark, aides to the pope haven't denied it either.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, is scheduled to deliver a briefing on the Brazil trip Wednesday morning in Rome.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly spelled Martins' name.*

[Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr. Allen will be travelling with Pope Francis in Brazil and will be filing regular reports.]

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