

Rio official blames financial troubles for pollution woes

June 26 2016, by Yann Bernal



Raw sewage and garbage litter Rio's Guanabara Bay, pictured here near the Museu do Amanha (Museum of Tomorrow) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on April 26, 2016.

Raw sewage and garbage litter Rio's Guanabara Bay, the Olympic sailing venue in the shadow of Sugarloaf Mountain, with pollution one of several major headaches for organizers and athletes ahead of the Games.

Brazil's "difficult financial conditions" are at fault, the environment secretary of Rio state, Andre Correa, said during an interview with AFP.

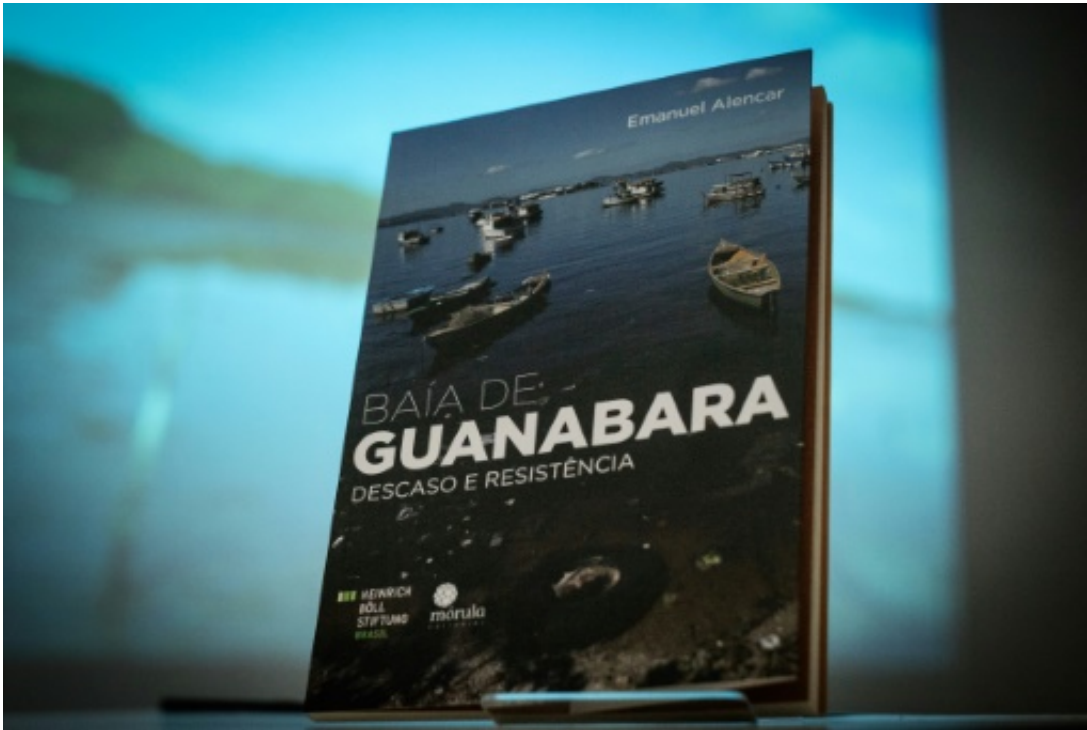
He spoke Thursday following the launch of a book by Emanuel Alencar about the failure of authorities to live up to their promises to clean up [pollution](#) ahead of the Rio Games, which begin on August 5.

Q: Can you swim in the bay?

A: It depends on the location. There are places where you can swim. I swam in the area where the sailing will be. There was major work, a 1.2-billion-reais project (\$356 million) but it's not obvious to ordinary people. I think we have to take small steps. Knowing the financial difficulties of Brazil, whoever said the bay will be clean in less than 20, 25 years is lying.

Q: The pollution of Guanabara Bay has been on the official agenda since the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. What's gone wrong?

A: There was a major error in strategy and communication. There was an investment of about 2.5 billion reais (\$741 million) and the local people were told that with this funding, the bay would be clean. Those who understand this issue know that this isn't enough funding to overcome the challenges. We will have a clean bay the day the 15 municipalities bordering it have sewage treatment. Studies show that's going to require 15 billion reais (\$4.4 billion), and we're far from that goal. Brazil is having a financial crisis and Rio state doesn't have the money. That's why the government decided to seek help from the private sector.



View of the book "Baía de Guanabara: Descaso e Resistência (Guanabara Bay: Neglect and Resistance)" by Brazilian journalist Emanuel Alencar displayed at its launching event in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on June 23, 2016

Q: The Baía Viva environmental activist group says the pollution in the bay can cause disease. Should athletes be worried?

A: The bay is not a homogeneous body of water, it has various problems. But the water quality at the entrance of the bay, where the sailing competitions will be held, meets international standards. You can swim there. Water flows in from the sea. The major challenge as concerns the Olympics is floating waste. It's a major problem that we face. The most important thing—more important than removing waste—is preventing it from getting there. We have installed 15 barriers and there will be 17 in place during the Games, eliminating 280 tons of waste per month. But we need people to realize that when they throw a plastic bottle on the

ground, the rain will carry it to the bay and no government or investment can combat that. Environmental education is crucial.

Q: How much of the bay has been decontaminated? The authorities have said they would clean up 80 percent of the pollution, but on Tuesday the mayor said it would be 60 percent. Which is correct?

A: There was a big misunderstanding, resulting in a deficit in credibility. There was talk about objectives but there was no financial support for attaining them. I will not cite any specific rate. It is necessary that the regional government and the people refer to the same rate. In cooperation with the World Bank and researchers, we are in the process of launching a digital platform so everyone can follow in real time what's being done with the investments in the bay.

Q: Who's responsible?

A: Brazil has a federal system. Various agencies are involved in managing the bay. Municipalities deal with waste. The Navy, a federal agency, is responsible for surface pollution. I'm responsible for industrial waste. We need a model to work in a coordinated manner in the bay.

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