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Promote road safety

In the past three decades, more people were killed by road crashes than by war or malaria. It is the right time for us to stop ignoring the problem and start doing something about it, writes KIM HAK-SU



A monk examines a pick-up that rammed into a truck in Nonthaburi. A monk and a novice were among six killed.

A tide of automobile accidents is sweeping across Asia and the Pacific. In spite of the dire statistics, there is a shocking indifference to road crashes and the suffering of their victims.

Having lived in Bangkok for the past six years, I am deeply impressed by the initiatives of the government of Thailand to improve road safety. Infrastructure improvements have helped to make roads safer. There are more and more signs warning people of drunk driving and advocating helmet wearing.

However, such public education endeavours to promote road safety must be sustained. Many car owners spend huge sums on new cars but often do not see any need to install safety features, not even for child passengers. The excuse? "Nanny can hold baby."

The Ministry of Public Health says 50,000 people are seriously injured or disabled each year as a result of drunk driving. Drinking contributes to 73 percent of the total number of severe cases of injury.

I wonder if the drivers ever thought of their own safety when they drank and drove, let alone the lives of others. The death of one income earner severely affects every dependent. It is not only the victims who suffer, but also the entire family and even the whole society.

Police records indicate that 12,871 people were killed and 94,441 seriously injured on the roads of Thailand in 2005. Injury surveillance data from hospitals indicate that actual numbers may be considerably higher. Road crashes are a leading cause of death in Thailand. The average economic cost of one death in a road crash is about three million baht, but the price in terms of human loss, grief and care is immeasurable.

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Worldwide, over 3,000 people are killed and over 100,000 are injured on roads every day. At least 440,000 people were killed and more than 20 million were injured on Asia-Pacific roads in 2005. The economic cost to the developing countries and economies in transition in Asia-Pacific was equivalent to 2.3 percent of GDP. This has extremely serious implications for social and economic development, with risks of offsetting efforts to improve people's living standards and reduce poverty.

Consideration behind the wheel

Most road crashes are preventable. Every action towards prevention will help. An estimated 80 percent of road crashes in Thailand are caused by inappropriate behaviour. As a parent, you could tell your child how to behave on the roads. As a driver, you should show consideration for the lives of other people, especially by not speeding and not combining alcohol use and driving.

As a media professional, you could highlight the importance of road safety in your work. As a car producer or car salesperson, you could use responsible advertising that emphasises the importance of safety aspects over speed. Everyone has a role to play.

Recently, Asian ministers of transport agreed to make road safety a policy priority and pledged to "save 600,000 lives and to prevent a commensurable number of serious injuries on the roads of Asia and the Pacific over the period 2007 to 2015."

By adopting the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's Ministerial Declaration on Improving Road Safety, the ministers also agreed to provide effective education on road safety awareness to the public, young people and drivers. It is encouraging to see the ministers' commitment.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on 26 October 2005 on improving global road safety. This resolution officially designated the third Sunday in November of every year as the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims as an "appropriate acknowledgement for victims of road traffic crashes and their families."

I would like to urge everyone to join in preventing road crashes. Otherwise, you or someone close to you could be among the 600,000 lives the ministers pledged to save in the coming years.

We may not be able to stop war, but we can observe traffic rules to save ourself and others. Every one of us can help make a difference.

Mr Kim Hak-Su is Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Unescap), based in Bangkok.