

## Chapter 2

# ROAD ACCIDENTS - A MAJOR CAUSE FOR CONCERN

### 2.1 Introduction

Growing concern about road safety problems led the Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development Division (TCTIDD) of ESCAP and the ADB to each commission major road safety studies in the Asia-Pacific region to quantify the scale and nature of the problem and assess its seriousness. These parallel but complementary studies have produced results which give cause for serious concern.

### 2.2 The scale and urgency of the problem

Although only a small proportion of the world's motor vehicles is in the Asia-Pacific region, 235,000 traffic related deaths occur annually, which is almost half of the 500,000 annual deaths worldwide. The number of persons injured or crippled in traffic accidents in the region is difficult to quantify because of underreporting but is certainly around three to four million each year. Road accident deaths are now the second largest cause of death for the populations of aged five to 44 years in many countries, and the problem is now considered by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be of epidemic proportions. Road accidents cost between one and three per cent of annual gross domestic product (GDP) for many developing countries and are serious economic drain. In the developing countries of the Asia-Pacific region alone, such losses in 1995 cost at least US\$ 20 billions, and much of these costs incurred foreign exchange losses, because vehicles, medicine and spare parts are often imported. Such annual losses, which are greater than the total annual lending to the region by the World Bank and ADB combined, undoubtedly inhibit the social and economic development of the region.

The annual increase in the number of vehicles for many countries in the region (such as China, India, Malaysia and Viet Nam) is currently about 15 to 18 per cent, which is equivalent to their vehicle fleets doubling in five years, and tripling in eight years. Together with the high proportion of two- and three-wheeled motorised vehicles in the region and the

relatively young age of the majority of the population, this contributes to the very serious road safety problems now being experienced in much of the region.

While the number of deaths and injuries has been reducing steadily in the developed countries, the number of deaths in developing countries is still rising at alarming rates. For example, road deaths increased by 18 per cent in Thailand from 1984 to 1992, by 30 per cent in Malaysia from 1985 to 1993, by 44 per cent in Sri Lanka from 1984 to 1991, by 45 per cent in India from 1985 to 1991, and by 79 per cent in the Republic of Korea from 1985 to 1991.

From 1888 to 1997, over two million people have been killed and about 16 million people have been injured or disabled in accidents in the Asia-Pacific region. Many of these casualties have been crippling injuries which will impose ongoing financial burdens on the victims' families and their communities. Current trends suggest that there will be about 450,000 deaths annually in the Asia-Pacific region before 2007 if effective action is not taken. So far, the problem has been largely unrecognized, and insufficient effort and attention has been given to the improvement of road safety in the region, even though road accidents now impose a heavy burden on the medical and hospital resources of many countries.

### 2.3 ESCAP/ADB Seminar to discuss options and actions

The growing problem of road accidents has become a source of serious concern to the development banks and international organizations active in the region. ESCAP and the ADB jointly organized a Seminar-cum-workshop on Road Safety in Asia and the Pacific at Bangkok in September 1996 to discuss the issues. It was attended by representatives of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, the British Department for International Development (DFID), GTZ and a number of other international agencies as well as government officials and safety experts from 23 countries throughout the region. At the Seminar, the participants discussed the problems and needs of the region in terms of

both national and regional initiatives required.

The major constraints inhibiting the improvement of safety in many of the developing countries of the region included the following:

- a) Fragmentation of responsibility for road safety issues;
- b) General absence of accurate information on the scale, nature and characteristics of the problem;
- c) Inadequate resources and activities to coordinate and implement safety counter-measures in all sectors which require improvement;
- d) Inadequate efforts to improve known hazardous locations;
- e) Lack of safety planning and design of road schemes; and
- f) Insufficient technical and financial resources to tackle the problem.

The main priorities for individual countries and ESCAP identified by the experts are outlined below.

## 2.4 Priorities at the national level

Priorities depend on the state of social development, motorization and economic development of a country. However the following sequence of steps can be taken:

- a) Prepare an independent review of road safety sectors to identify weaknesses and inadequacies in each of the sectors affecting road safety;
- b) Organize of a national seminar to raise awareness among political decision makers and the general public and bring together the key players to discuss road safety needs and issues;
- c) Establish an effective accident data base involving a standard accident reporting form and a micro computer-based accident data storage and analysis system;
- d) Establish a national road safety council with adequate technical and financial support to coordinate road safety activities across all sectors;

- e) Develop key professionals through in-country and overseas training courses and study tours; and
- f) Develop and implement a priority action plan to implement urgent improvements and to develop the institutional capacity of local agencies and organizations. This should be based on the Guidelines on Road Safety Action Plans and Programmes.

## 2.5 Priorities at the regional level

The main priorities at the regional level include the following:

- a) Collect and disseminate comparative data on road safety statistics and activities in ESCAP member countries;
- b) Identify the major road safety problems facing the region;
- c) Encourage the development of regional initiatives and mechanisms to tackle major problems;
- d) Collaborate with multilateral agencies and other funding institutions to develop a coordinated strategy and regional road safety initiative (RRSI) for tackling the road safety problems of the Asia-Pacific region over the next decade;
- e) Maintain a regional road safety database which should be accessible as needed to encourage the analysis of accidents and the development of better understanding of road safety characteristics and trends in the region; and
- f) Establish mechanisms to encourage dissemination of information regularly to a network of road safety professionals to provide a common source of information and clearing house for exchange of research results.

## 2.6 Guidelines on action plans and programmes

This publication offers consolidated guidance and advice on the activities necessary to do the following:

- a) Coordinate road safety activities;

- b) Develop and implement a two- to three-year priority action plan; and
- c) Prepare and implement five-year road safety programmes.

The 'Guidelines on Road Safety Action Plans and Programmes' will be distributed throughout the Asia-Pacific region and will supplement the 'Road Safety Guidelines for the Asian and Pacific Region' developed by the ADB. In addition, ESCAP is collaborating with the World Bank, ADB and World Health Organization to develop a regional road safety initiative which would coordinate activities of various international organizations and aid agencies and implement a series of interventions to improve the situation over the next decade. ESCAP, as a result of the recently approved Regional Action Plan (RAP) Phase I (1997-2001) for the implementation of the New Delhi Action Plan on Infrastructure Development, has a clear mandate that road safety is to be regarded as an issue requiring urgent action and one of the priority areas for ESCAP.

Countries in the region should also take the opportunity in discussions with donor countries, or with the development banks, to indicate their support for road safety issues. At each donor's meeting, countries should identify road safety as a key priority area within the regional development programme and their national development programmes.

## 2.7 Concluding remarks

In the period 1983 to 1994, over two million people died in road accidents in the Asia-Pacific region, and many millions more have been crippled or injured, some being disabled for the rest of their lives. Road accidents cost over US\$ 20 billion annually for the developing countries of the region and this clearly inhibits their economic and social development. Action should be taken to tackle this growing and serious problem. ESCAP and other international organizations have recognized the problem and urge member countries to give it the priority it deserves. The following chapters discuss ways to tackle this growing and urgent problem.



*Millions will die or be injured or crippled needlessly in the Asia-Pacific region if action is not taken to tackle road safety problems effectively.*