

Growing road traffic death toll requires action from all sectors, urges new report

Road traffic crashes kill 1.2 million people every year but by 2020 this figure is set to increase by 83% in low- and middle-income countries which already shoulder 90% of the global road traffic death toll, warns a new report launched in Paris on World Health Day, 7 April 2004.

Although road traffic crashes cost the world US\$ 518 billion every year, many countries have the know-how to reduce this figure, says the *World report on road traffic injury prevention*, the first ever joint report on the subject released by WHO and the World Bank. (See related editorial, *Road safety is no accident*, in this month's issue of the *Bulletin*, p. 241.)

"Thousands of people die on the world's roads every day," said WHO Director-General, Dr LEE Jong-wook on World Health Day, which this year is devoted to road safety. "We have the knowledge to bring these numbers down — what we are calling for now is increased political will and coordinated action ... Without effective action now, road traffic collisions will kill even more people in the future."

The bulk of the global burden of road traffic-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, with countries in South-East Asia and the Western Pacific regions accounting for more than half of all road traffic deaths. The economic implications of this for developing countries are grave since more than half of all road traffic deaths occur among young adults between 15 and 44 years of age — often the family breadwinners, most of whom may never have owned a vehicle.

"Most road traffic collisions touch the communities and countries who can least afford to cope with the injuries and death these crashes cause," said LEE.

The annual bill footed by such countries for road traffic crashes stands at an estimated US\$ 65 billion — more than the total amount received by these same countries in development assistance and representing between 1% and 2% of their gross national product.

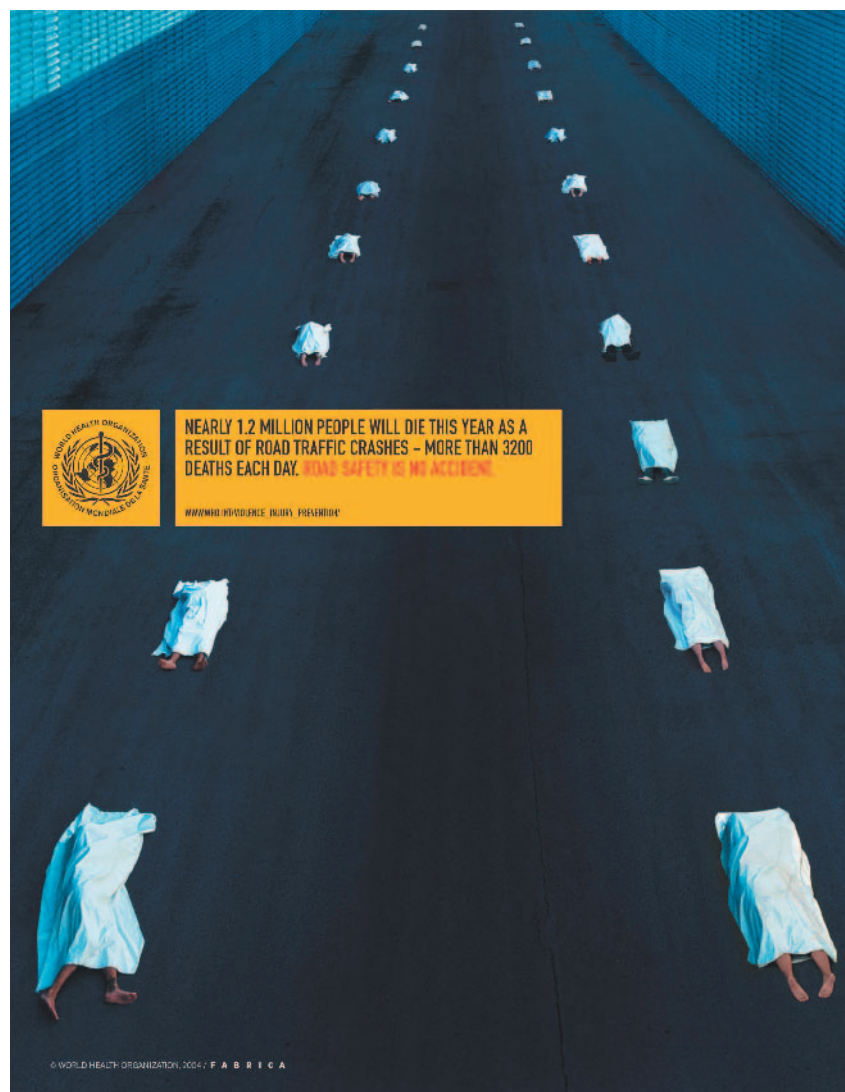
President of the Republic of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki, wrote in his preface to the report: "Over 3000 Kenyans are killed on our roads every year, most of them between the ages of 15 and 44 years. The cost to our economy from these accidents is in excess of US\$ 50 million exclusive of actual loss of life." The Kenyan President, a survivor of a severe road traffic crash himself, went on to "urge all nations to implement the recommendations of the *World report on road traffic injury prevention* as a guide to promoting road safety in their countries."

The report says that reducing risk in the world's road traffic systems is a multi-sectoral responsibility, requiring commitment and informed decision-making by government, industry,

nongovernmental organizations and international agencies. It also requires the participation of people from a wide variety of disciplines including road engineers, motor vehicle designers, law enforcement officers, health professionals and community groups. It recommends a "systems approach", moving away from a focus on individual behaviour alone to a holistic assessment of the problem.

"A death on the road is not the consequence of one person's action: road safety depends on the design and condition of the road and the car, transport policies, law enforcement, and people's behaviour," said LEE.

The report offers guidelines for adaptation at the local level beginning with the identification of a lead government agency to guide the national road



Poster for the Global Road Safety Campaign, launched on World Health Day, 7 April 2004.

traffic safety effort. It also highlights the need for countries to assess the magnitude of the problem, the policies, institutional settings and capacity relating to road traffic injury. It recommends the preparation of a national road safety strategy and plan of action and the allocation of financial and human resources to address the problem.

“Road safety is no accident,” says World Bank President, James D Wolfensohn together with LEE in a joint foreword to the report. “It requires strong political will and concerted, sustained efforts across a range of sectors. Acting now will save lives. We urge governments, as well as other sectors of society, to embrace and implement the key recommendations of the report.”

The United Nations General Assembly is to hold a plenary meeting — the first of its kind to address the issue of road safety — on 14 April, attended by senior national and international policymakers including LEE. The meeting will consider a draft resolution containing suggestions for implementing some of the report’s recommendations, proposals for advancing the international road

safety agenda and for identifying a focal point within the UN, among other issues. The following month, the World Health Assembly will consider adopting a resolution on road safety.

Road safety is one of the themes of the 7th World Conference on Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion, which will take place in Vienna, Austria, on 6–9 June 2004. More than 1500 health specialists and opinion leaders from over a hundred countries are expected to attend.

“The conference will be an excellent opportunity to discuss how to further implement the technical aspects of the *World report on road traffic injury prevention*,” said Dr Etienne Krug, Director of WHO’s department of Violence and Injury Prevention. ■

PAHO works to restore public health services in Haiti

The rebellion in Haiti which erupted in early February 2004 forcing President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile on 29

February has had a devastating effect on an already precarious health system, said officials from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the WHO Regional Office for the Americas.

PAHO reported on 1 March that most of Haiti’s public hospitals and health centres had ceased full operations — including the State University Hospital which takes care of the capital city’s population — and that the situation was compounded by a lack of electricity and water, triggered by fuel shortages. Whilst most of the private hospitals were beginning to resume operations, the eight hospitals in the area surrounding the country’s capital, Port-au-Prince, were unable to take care of patients, leaving many medical emergency cases unattended. Only about 60% of Haiti’s 8 million people have access to health care and the vast majority relies on public hospitals.

According to WHO’s Situation Report for Haiti on 8 March referring to the status of public health services in the capital, “there is no current capacity to assist patients either with injuries or with diseases.”



A Haitian armed rebel checks a truck from the International Committee of the Red Cross bringing medicine to the rebel-held Haitian city of Gonaives, north of the capital, Port-au-Prince.

REUTERS/Daniel Aguilier