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Safety (News Analysis)

GO FOR REALISTIC ROAD SAFETY GOALS

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 12 (Bernama) -- If there is a prize to be given to people who never lose hope, it should go to those sitting on the National Road Safety Council.

Year in and year out, they have had the misfortune of seeing their efforts at reducing the number of road accidents, especially the fatal ones, going down the drain.

In its road safety campaigns, it always sets the target of bringing down the number of road accidents but this has not only fallen flat but is also becoming farther and farther from being achieved.

No one could fault its good intentions of trying to reduce the number of people, most of whom were very young as well as in their prime, who lost their lives in road accidents in the country.

The statistics are very grim indeed. Last year, over 6,000 people had to end their lives in this way, perhaps more than the total number of people who died in natural disasters like earthquakes, typhoons and floods on this planet in 1996.

According to some studies, losses due to road accidents cost the country billions of ringgit yearly, not to mention the untold sufferings of the loved ones they left behind. Road accidents also have a direct bearing on the growing number of boys and girls becoming orphans.

Equally a cause of concern in the loss of productive human resources and talents that could otherwise have contributed significantly to Malaysia's exciting developments in the future.

Because over 60 per cent of those who died in road accidents are motorcyclists and their pillion riders, road accidents are a major cause of Malaysia losing its young citizens.

This is based on the reasonable assumption that most motorcyclists and pillion riders are in their 20s and 30s as well as teenagers.

The big question is whether road safety measures so far carried out in the country have really gone down to tackling the root causes of this continuing wasteful loss of lives in a country regarded as one of the world's most peaceful?.

Or it is realistic at all, in the first place, to expect the number of road accidents to fall in the face of huge increases in the number of motor vehicles being added on the roads on a daily basis.

Kuala Lumpur is a classic example -- the number of cars and motorcycles is mind-boggling especially to its city planners, who appear to have resigned to the fact that no amount of new roads or flyovers could hope to cope with the traffic gridlocks.

A senior National Road Safety Council (NRSC) member said it is practically unrealistic to set a target of reducing road accidents in Malaysia's case, because unlike in some developed countries where the number of motor vehicles has more or less reached a plateau or equilibrium, the country's vehicle population, now at more than four million, is up and up.

"Although you might say that our target is unrealistic, we have no alternative but to set a target of reducing accidents... you can't expect us to do otherwise," he said.

He agreed that half the battle against road accidents would be won if the number of those involving motorcycles, the main cause of road deaths, could be drastically cut.

Motorcyclists and pillion riders are easily the most vulnerable "candidates" for this death list but efforts to promote safe riding almost fade into insignificance compared to measures and the political will devoted to fighting scourges like AIDS and drug addiction, according to analysts.

This situation even prompted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to come out with this comment on Sunday: " I myself drive sometimes. I find that sometime motorcyclists overtake in a reckless manner..as if they could not die. But actually, motorcyclists are the ones that are most vulnerable to fatal accidents.

" I just don't know what else could be done.. we advise, we have the police, we use radars and all sorts of things, I don't know what else except we completely stop travelling," said the Prime Minister whose remarks should be seen as giving a strong political will as well as the beginning of a new approach to tackling a nagging problem.

The lack of political will in the past could be seen from the fact that after years of talking about having special lanes for motorcyclists, there are hardly such lanes available especially in areas designated as accident-prone for motorcyclists.

The most visible of these lanes are on both sides of the Federal Highway in Petaling Jaya but even parts of the lanes have now been rendered out of operation by the ongoing construction works.

A senior multinational oil company executive told Bernama that the most startling thing he observed in Malaysia was the sheer number of motorcycles on the country's roads.

" My greatest fear in this peaceful country is to be run over by a motorcycle as I cross the streets," he said.

The NRSC official conceded that it is impossible for a country like Malaysia to check the number of motorcycles being allowed on the roads because it is still the "cheapest" means of transportation for the low-income group.

" Our objective is not to cut down the number of motorcycles, but to regulate their use, just as the use of cars and other vehicles. This can hopefully be achieved with improved public transport systems like buses and LRT as alternatives to having to travel on motorcycles in the future," he said.

It is obvious that the authorities need to come out with even more drastic ways and means to bring down the number of deaths involving motorcyclists and pillion riders, even if this means having special motorcycle lanes, to begin with.--BERNAMA

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