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Moves for greater road safety

WHEN it comes to road accidents and fatality rate, Malaysia has earned the unfortunate distinction of being among the tops. Statistics for the first four months of this year nationwide showed an increase of 4,488 cases or 7.28 per cent from 61,605 cases recorded for the same period last year.

Although the figures for deaths, serious and minor injuries were on the decline, the rates were no doubt still high. There was only a marginal drop of about two per cent in the death rate from 2,140. But the serious injuries declined about 13 per cent from 5,448.

Police attributed the lower fatality rate to enforcement efforts, the blitz of which was seen during the Chinese New Year and Hari Raya holidays. There was an alarming increase of accidents last year, with the North-South Expressway accounting for 7,278 compared with 6,076 in 1995. The number of accidents on other roads last year soared by 24,966 to 181,381.

The debate in the print media following the April furore over the Jalan Ipoh-Cemor accident when a car ploughed into a group of factory workers, killing seven of them and injuring two has since waned. Naturally, the Malaysian Bar Council opposed the proposal by the Transport Ministry to suspend the driving licence of an accused motorist involved in a fatal accident pending trial. Such a move, it said, would be tantamount to punishing a person before he was found guilty.

Objection notwithstanding, the ministry appeared bent on taking reckless drivers off the roads immediately. This prompted the Bar Council to offer to set up a panel of expert lawyers to work with the ministry "for the common cause of dealing with a national problem." The council's assistance will be of tremendous help not only to strengthen the Road Transport Act to deal with reckless drivers but also improve related legislations.

The many statements from the ministry promising action following each major road accident have inevitably given rise to high expectations among concerned citizens that things should improve in the near future in dealing with the high number of accidents and unsavoury attitude of some drivers, particularly road bullies. Thus, the announcement this week that a three-year campaign which aims to take a proactive stand towards solving the problems faced on Malaysian roads is good news to the motoring public. "Road Mission 2000" to be launched on July 22 with the theme "Driving the Nation Towards Road Courtesy" has an impressive strategy. Sponsored by a private insurance firm, it wants to reward, educate, prevent through healthy fear and to punish. Significant will be the roadshows to visit schools to educate the young. The proposal to reduce traffic fines for errant motorists who display Road Mission 2000 stickers will be an incentive for motorists to participate in this historic campaign, the first involving the private sector.

But be forewarned that the concession is not a passport for motorists to commit traffic offences. Moreover, the reduction will not be granted to habitual offenders and motorists committing serious offences, said the Road Transport Department.

This massive effort and the various campaigns by the ministry to create road safety awareness which will be launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad next month give us hope that driving along Malaysian roads should soon be less hazardous.

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