

11/01/1998

Towards fewer road accidents?

LAST week's blown-up front-page picture in the New Straits Times showing the mangled wreckage of a fiery four-vehicle collision in Pakistan during which 50 died and seven were injured is a stark reminder to Malaysians that we are not exempt from such horrendous accidents.

We have had our share of similar horrors in the past two years, although mercifully the death toll was much less. Early last year, as the nationwide fatalities soared to a high of 6,233 for the first 11 months of 1996, 421 more over the 1995 figure, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself spoke out in frustration as to what else could be done to save lives. Road safety campaigns and stiffer penalties obviously had little effect.

As clearly, recklessness of motorists is a major cause of accidents on Malaysian roads, it will indeed be a challenge to the authorities who hope to cut the number of deaths by 30 per cent this year. Malaysians will no doubt be keeping tabs anxiously, especially during the double festive season at the end of the month, when more than one million are expected on the highways and roads in their annual balik kampung.

The new year did not start off well for the Malaysian motoring public. Just as we are hoping that the clean slate would last for some time, two fatal accidents were recorded last week. The Pahang and Sabah accidents took six lives, including four from the same family, and injured nine. The nation also viewed with dismay the police report that the last four weeks of 1997 saw 546 people killed in 19,447 accidents compared with 498 deaths in 15,811 accidents in December 1996. Despite the higher December figure, the good news is that the fatalities for the whole of last year have dipped slightly compared with the previous year from 6,304 to 6,293.

But, sadly, the attitude of Malaysian motorists does not seem to be on the mend. According to the police, their presence and media publicity on a nationwide 14-day traffic operation launched on Dec 21, had not deterred 73,462 motorists from flouting traffic laws along highways and trunk roads. A total of 21,121, or 28.75 per cent of the total summonses, were for speeding. The other main offences were overtaking along double lines, dangerous driving and failure to abide by traffic regulations.

Just as it was revealed at the close of the year that there was an alarming increase in the number of road rage cases reported to the police in the past two years, there was yet another case in the new year to add to the tally. Meanwhile, the report by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health that it is concerned over the increasing number of workers involved in accidents while commuting to work brings no cheer.

Given the nation's perennial high accident rate, aggravated by the irresponsible attitude of many members of the motoring public, it is high time stiffer laws were introduced as an immediate deterrent. Incarceration, mandatory for cases involving deaths and serious injuries, and suspension of offenders' driving licence are known to be effective. The more than 90 per cent compliance with the ban on the use of handphones while driving, two months after it was enforced in 1996, is a case in point. Bullies should be severely dealt with as a lesson to others. As in the anti-littering campaign, tougher legislation and stringent enforcement must go hand in hand with education, particularly of the young. The Government's campaign to promote safe riding has produced some results

with the significant drop in the number of fatal motorcycle accidents. The effort needs to be intensified.

While the clamour for the death sentence, a sign of the outrage over rising reckless and dangerous driving, has been turned down, there should be no let-up on the part of the authorities to quickly introduce comprehensive and tighter legislation to deal with this problem. The public is still awaiting the promised amendments to the Road Transport Act 1987.

(END)