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We must not show mercy to the traffic offenders

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NUMBERS don't lie. Which made at least two senior Ministers upset when daily statistics showed the increased rate of road accidents on Malaysian roads.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu both made statements carried in the print and electronic media, expressing their unhappiness over the mounting death toll on the roads.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was also reported to have said that he was "terrified" at the manner in which some motorcyclists exhibit their riding "prowess", adding that they bordered on a suicidal mission.

He went on to describe the riding habits of those involved as "reckless and irresponsible".

The three of them made their statements separately. They were reacting to statistics provided by the Federal traffic police department on road accidents compiled during the recent festive season when vehicular traffic on the highways was at its peak.

There was never a day during that period without several fatal accidents. The balik kampung exodus at the end of last month, when Muslims and Chinese celebrated Hari Raya Puasa and the start of the Year of the Tiger, made many sections of the country's highways and trunk roads death traps.

It was the numerous road accidents which led the police to introduce Ops Statik (which was until recently referred to as Ops Pacak). The idea is to monitor traffic flow besides enforcing traffic rules and regulations during festive seasons.

It was thought that the sight of policemen on the roadside would deter motorists from committing traffic offences.

Well, this may seem so on the whole but it has certainly not helped to reduce fatal road accidents.

In its latest exercise, a total of 1,247 traffic policemen were stationed at 565 locations nationwide operating round the clock.

In 1996, there were 9,418 accidents recorded during the duration of the exercise; last year, this rose to 10,155. The road deaths totalled 378 and 314 respectively.

These accident statistics led Dr Ling to invite suggestions from the public on other ways and means to reduce, and if possible, eliminate altogether, road accidents.

This is impossible.

Road accidents are not likely going to be reduced just because everyone in a position of authority express their disappointment at the rate which they occur. Neither would such accidents be reduced each time Ops Statik is launched or some road safety campaign is initiated at toll plazas and elsewhere.

Strictly speaking, fatal road accidents cannot be directly linked to Ops Statik. In fact, Ops Statik merely highlights the number of road accidents and it proves a moot point - that the presence of law enforcement officers along highways and trunk roads do not by themselves prevent accidents.

Many of the accidents could have been avoided if motorists were more careful when driving.

That Malaysian drivers are largely an indisciplined lot is the single

biggest factor which contributed to these accidents. And these indisciplined habits and manners were acquired from the day a new driver gets his or her licence from the Road Transport Department.

The exasperated Dr Ling has welcomed the public to offer suggestions on how to reduce road accidents. But the Minister himself has said on several occasions that Malaysian drivers lack discipline and are usually very aggressive when they get behind the wheel.

Dr Ling should tackle the problem at its root, that is, the lack of discipline among drivers. There is no point in Dr Ling's Cabinet colleague, Samy Vellu, calling on life bans on reckless drivers when even the small offences are not given adequate reprimand.

If there is going to be any serious attempt to curb road accidents, then it starts with strict enforcement of traffic laws and regulations.

The relevant authorities must stick to their guns when it comes to law enforcement and they should do so without fear or favour.

Listening to pleas by traffic offenders on the roadside would merely invite unnecessary trouble and misconception. One needs only to enter a coffeeshop to listen to numerous allegations of corruption among officers responsible for enforcement of traffic laws and regulations.

When laws are strictly enforced, there will eventually be a gradual reduction in road accidents. Substantial fines should be imposed on all kinds of offences, especially on those exceeding speed limits and driving vehicles which are not roadworthy.

If there is going to be compromise, then let the courts decide; not the roadside enforcement officers.

If the intention is to discipline road users, including pedestrians, then the authorities must take their enforcement work seriously.

Even after millions have been spent on overhead bridges, one can still see pedestrians jaywalking - an offence punishable under Malaysian law; but one which is not strictly enforced.

Only when such steps have been taken would repeated offenders have their licences revoked and suspended. This is to be dispensed with no mercy at all. There will be some form of public outcry when this is done, but the authorities must take the attitude that one needs to be cruel to be kind.

Road users who are a danger to themselves and to others must be taken off the street at once before they cause more trouble.

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