

18/01/1999

Change of attitude among motorists vital to reduce casualties

Leslie Andres

HARI Raya Aidilfitri and Chinese New Year as well as other festivals should be a time for merriment with family and friends. But for some, the festive season turns into one of tragedy and grief.

Each year during the festive period, several hundred Malaysians are killed in road crashes nationwide leaving their loved ones with only memories to cherish.

It is this senseless loss of life which prompts the police to carry out special traffic operations everytime a major festive occasion draws near in the hope that massive police presence along highways and roads would deter motorists from speeding and other driving offences.

For the first three days of Ops Statik II, it looked like road crash statistics would continue to escalate.

But on the fourth day of the traffic operations, the numbers showed a considerable drop with nine deaths taking the four-day total to 51 - 18 less fatalities compared to the corresponding period during Ops Statik I last year.

The following day (Saturday), the number of deaths rose to 19, taking the total over five days to 70 - 11 less than the corresponding period last year.

If the numbers at the end of the operation do show a decline, could it be due to the fact that in the last two years, Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Chinese New Year were celebrated almost simultaneously?

National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health chairman Datuk Lee Lam Thye seems upbeat about the decrease.

However, he agreed that this may be due to a possible decrease in the number of road users this year during Hari Raya as many Chinese who were on the roads last year at the same time would not be doing so this year.

"Maybe we should wait for both celebrations to pass before we tally the figures and see if there is really a decrease."

He was quick to point out that the numbers were still high and there was a long way to go to reduce the number of road fatalities during festivals.

"What counts most is a proper attitude among road users. We cannot achieve the desired results if the attitude of road users does not change," he said.

Lee is not the only public figure to comment on the attitude of road users.

During Chinese New Year last year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described some motorcyclists as "suicidal" when commenting on the high number of motorcyclists and pillion riders killed each festive season.

He had added that the way some of them rode their machines "terrified" him.

The Prime Minister had good reasons to state what he did.

The problems which some motorcyclists cause, weaving in and out of traffic and riding recklessly at breakneck speed with a devil-may-care attitude is no secret to road users.

In Ops Statik I last year, 138 of the 274 who died were motorcyclists.

Although Dr Mahathir's comments were aimed mostly at motorcyclists, the Prime Minister could easily have said the same thing about other categories of motorists.

In a Press conference on Jan 9, this year, Federal traffic police chief

Datuk Supian Amat said that along with the 274 road deaths during Ops Statik I, police recorded a total of 9,901 road crashes, an increase from 8,538 crashes and 262 deaths in 1997.

"Police statistics show that 24 per cent of the crashes reported during this period were caused by speeding, 23 per cent by dangerous overtaking and another 20 per cent by dangerous driving."

But if operations such as Ops Statik I and II are not enough to reduce the number of crashes and road deaths, what else can be done?

Many have written in to the media with their views on how to solve the nation's road crash woes with some New Straits Times readers suggesting measures such as more stringent police enforcement and stiffer penalties for traffic offenders.

Perhaps a combination of these measures could help reduce road crashes.

In the final analysis, however, it all boils down to one thing - the attitude of motorists.

"At the end of the day, it all depends on the attitude of the people out there. It is imperative that motorists evaluate their stance on the importance of life.

"One must remember three things when starting on a journey - Think Safe, Drive Safe, Arrive Safe," said Lee.

One factor that seems to escape attention each time the topic of road crashes and death statistics come up is whether road conditions have anything to do with the problem.

Although not a major contributory factor, road conditions cannot be ruled out in the matter.

Lee rightly points out that most accidents recorded occurred on Federal and State roads and not highways such as the North-South Expressway.

One need only look at the statistics for the first four days of Ops Statik II to see this. Of the 2,542 accidents recorded, only 83 occurred on highways.

"Highways such as the North-South Expressway are well maintained. One important aspect is for the Government to make sure that a sufficient budget is allocated for the Public Works Department which takes care of these State roads."

All these measures would greatly help the Government, particularly the police and the Transport Ministry, reduce the number of crashes.

The number of fatalities and injured is still high but if everyone plays their part, the war against unnecessary road deaths can be won.

As for Ops Statik II, despite the initial encouraging signs, it is still too early to tell if the operation will be a success. We can only hope that it is.

(END)