

Peace on the Roads

by Óscar Arias Sánchez

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In the 1980s Central America was engaged in violent struggles that claimed the lives of more than 70,000 people. But we were able to bring a peaceful resolution to these struggles, restore human rights and work for a better future. I dedicated my life to this cause.

Times have changed, and now peace requires a different kind of fight. We face a danger that not only kills people but lulls us into an unconscious silence. It doesn't attract media and global attention as wars and murders do, but it is violence nonetheless -- violence on our roads.

Road traffic injuries kill 1.2 million victims around the world each year, a toll equivalent to the disease burden of tuberculosis or malaria. And as with these diseases, the tremendous burden of death and disability resulting from these injuries falls primarily on low- and middle-income countries where victims are commonly the most vulnerable road users: pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcyclists. When the person killed or seriously injured is the breadwinner, the families of these victims are often forced into poverty. The cumulative cost to the Latin American and Caribbean region is about 1 percent of our gross domestic product, or more than \$20 billion a year.

World Bank statistics show that in 2000, the Latin American and Caribbean region had the highest average rate of road traffic deaths per capita in the world: We lose about 122,000 lives every year. And for every person who dies, 20 to 50 are seriously injured. If we do not take strong and effective measures, this number is sure to rise markedly.

There are powerful tools that can save lives in our region and elsewhere. In Costa Rica, we combined a public awareness campaign with a new seat belt law and strong police enforcement to increase seat belt usage for drivers from 24 percent to 82 percent, and recorded fatality rates dropped. In Ghana, placement of speed bumps and rumble strips at crash hot spots reduced fatalities by 55 percent and serious injuries by 76 percent. In Thailand, a compulsory helmet law for motorcyclists reduced serious head injuries by 40 percent and mortality from motorcycle injuries by 24 percent. These interventions are not only effective, they are some of the least expensive ways to save lives that we have -- for any part of the world.

Our failure to use these powerful tools for prevention means that we simply allow these violent deaths to continue. We must not turn away from what is happening. It is both urgent and important that all nations of the Latin American and Caribbean region work together to stop the growing epidemic of deaths and injuries on our roads.

Toward this end representatives of every country in the region have been invited to meet in San José, Costa Rica, next week to sign the Declaration of San José. The declaration will urge all nations of the region to implement recommendations of the World Bank and World Health Organization's World Report on Road Traffic Injury and Prevention.

Emphasizing road safety as a critical part of sustainable development, we will urge that resources be committed that are commensurate with the need and magnitude of the problem. And we hope that development banks will lead the way by requiring that at least 10 percent of their investments for

infrastructure development be applied to road safety programs. I have signed a presidential decree that commits Costa Rica to exactly this course.

We will also urge that resources be committed to the World Bank Global Road Safety Facility by the industrialized nations so that the facility can reach a total investment of at least \$300 million by 2015. This program has the potential to make funds available to the countries in our region to develop road safety programs and the management capacity needed to make them work.

Finally we will commit to jointly develop a regional organization that will represent all relevant sectors of government, civil society and the private sector and promote a region-wide approach to road safety.

We have an opportunity to address this threat, to substitute peace and survival for violence and death. We have faced such choices in the past and we have won. The people of this region have the same right to safety as those in other parts of the world. I am committed to promoting road safety because I know it will benefit Costa Rica and every other country in our region. We hope our success will also be a beacon of hope for many others in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. I know we can succeed; I only fear that we are running out of time.

The writer is President of Costa Rica. He was awarded the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end conflicts in several Central American countries.

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