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# Highway of death: Who will stop the increasing accidents on Thika Road?

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## In Summary

- Police estimate that since January 1, more than 70 people have died on Thika Road, and another 142 on other Nairobi roads.
- The statistics do not include those who succumb to injuries in hospitals, which would make the toll much higher.
- The new highway was designed to open up transport into Nairobi from the satellite municipalities of Thika and Kiambu and surrounding settlements.
- How many more lives must be lost on the killer highway before somebody finds a solution to the carnage?

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Banker Naftali Etabale left Vihiga on Thursday to visit his family in Ngoingwa estate in Thika.

All was well for the hundreds of kilometres he travelled until he was just about 20 kilometres from home. As fate would have it, the banker did not get to see his family.

The matatu he was travelling in collided with a saloon car. The passengers, including Mr Etabale, alighted and requested a fare refund so they could board another matatu to complete their journey.

As they waited, a truck ran into the passengers. Mr Etabale and three other passengers died instantly.

The four joined a growing list of pedestrians, motorists, motorcycle riders and passengers who have fallen victim to the new highway, the latest and longest black spot in the country.

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The new highway was designed to open up transport into Nairobi from the satellite municipalities of Thika and Kiambu and surrounding settlements.

Along the road are major institutions including, ironically, the Traffic Police headquarters. Yet this is one highway where public service vehicle drivers break the 80kph speed limit with abandon.

A spot check by the *Sunday Nation* found matatus picking and dropping passengers on the expressway with other vehicles zooming past instead of pulling off to the stages and side-roads provided for that purpose.

Thika Road is also endowed with such major institutions such as the Survey Field headquarters, the Kenya School of Monetary Studies, General Service Unit headquarters, Kenya Breweries headquarters, the Safari Park Hotel, United States International University and residential estates.

In addition, it also hosts institutions such as Kenyatta University and satellite towns like Githurai and Ruiru, making it Kenya's busiest highway.

The construction has opened up the possibility of higher speeds but footbridges are yet to be completed.

Although it is the first highway of its kind in Kenya, no campaign has been done to educate motorists and pedestrians about the care and caution that needs to be exercised to avoid the string of tragedies witnessed almost on a daily basis.

Going by police figures, Thika Road claims about two people every 24 hours. Another 10 are either maimed or live with the psychological scars of an accident ordeal each day.

“This superhighway is a killer. The number of people I see knocked down on a daily basis cannot fit the fingers on one hand,” says Kinuthia Mburu.

His source of income is a motorcycle that he rides along the highway for close to 18 hours a day, ferrying passengers and goods. “Some die, most are injured. Every day.”

He has lost personal friends and seen strangers breathe their last. He tries to explain away the deaths as a consequence of development.

He exudes an air of invincibility when he says he has seen and lived through plenty. “*Kifo ni moja. Shida ni kuingoja,*” he says, explaining the inevitability of death.

### **Invincibility**

But when he narrates the death of a close friend, he accuses someone, saying it could not have been a death predetermined by God. It was not fate.

“That matatu man was speeding,” he says. “There is no way he could have stopped in time to avoid hitting him,” he says, giving an emotional account of what happened to his friend, also a boda boda rider.

At no point does he mention his friend was driving on the wrong lane. The police report indicates that he rode into oncoming traffic after a section of the highway had been closed for maintenance.

“There were no signs for people coming into town to expect oncoming traffic. He took a bend and right in front of him was a speeding matatu,” says Mr Mburu.

His friend died instantly and became part of the statistics. Police say at least 13 motorcycle riders have died on Nairobi roads since January.

For Nonano Mwangi, 33, who operates his pushcart on the Githurai flyover, traversing the highway is a matter of life and death.

“Nowadays, getting back home is not something we take for granted,” says Mr Mwangi.

“The designers forgot us. We are left struggling for space with buses and matatus. We can’t compete with them when they are moving at 140kph. Each day is like being on a suicide-watch list.”

He waits for clients just under the flyover. Next to him is Kevin Oduor, a roast maize seller. The spot he currently occupies used to be his cousin’s.

“A bus knocked him dead,” he says. “The driver lost control of the vehicle and it went over the concrete barrier and slammed into him.”

A few metres away, the monotony of the shiny metallic barrier lining the road is broken by a strip of red and white tape.

Such sections are visible after several kilometres. These indicate areas where speeding vehicles have rammed against the steel rails, most of the time with fatal results.

Mr Mwangi and Mr Oduor are just two of hundreds of vendors selling vegetables, sweets, sugarcane and so on, along the road. They insist they are not breaking any law.

“If this were illegal, why would the City Council be collecting tax from us every day,” asks Reuben Kimani. He sells water on the highway.

The mushrooming markets pose the greatest dangers to drivers and pedestrians. There’s constant human traffic crisscrossing the highway either to buy or sell something from someone on the other end.

### **Little knowledge**

There is a combination of ignorance to road rules, carelessness and little knowledge of the highway code among drivers, pedestrians and cyclists,

which is a potent mix for disasters, Nairobi Traffic Commandant Patrick Lumumba told the *Sunday Nation*.

“And the numbers do not lie,” he says. Overwhelmed traffic police officers say they have lost count of the number of times they have had to attend to incidents on Thika Road.

“There is a night we collected five bodies,” an exasperated officer said. He cannot be identified because he is not allowed to speak to the press.

Hospitals are also being weighed down by the accidents. “There are no words for the situation we face. Our facilities are stretched to the limit.

“Accident victims occupy more than 70 per cent of our bed space,” says Mr Richard Lesiyampe, CEO of Kenyatta National Hospital.

“Some survive, some die, but the fact remains, a majority of these deaths can be prevented.”

In 2011, the referral hospital admitted 1,426 road accident victims; 166 of them died while receiving treatment. Forty-six were pedestrians.

“There is need to have long-term solutions such as the provision of footbridges and pedestrian lanes.

“We can’t have pedestrians, boda boda operators and cyclists jostling for the same space. There can only be one outcome in such a situation,” says traffic boss Lumumba.

But even in places where pedestrian crossings are marked, a majority of people ignore these and cross the road at places they are not supposed to.

“People inexplicably ignore zebra crossings, footbridges and think they are faster than a vehicle doing 80kph.

“There is absolutely no logic that can explain a pedestrian being run over under a functioning footbridge,” Mr Lumumba says.

But Mr Mwangi disagrees. “Where are we supposed to cross the road? They put Zebra crossings that lead to two-foot high steel barriers.

“You run across the road then jump over the barriers. This is not steeplechase. What happens to the old and sickly who cannot run and jump over the barriers?”

And as he revs his 150cc motorcycle anticipating a dash towards a potential client, Mr Mburu says part of the reason his friend died was because the road signage was nonexistent.

“At times we operate on guesswork. You use a lane in the morning, in the evening it is closed. The only sign is a stationary earth mover in the middle of the road,” he says of Thika Road.

Those responsible for the signage and maintenance of the road say they are doing everything in their power to bring the road up to the required standards.

The Kenya National Highways Authority (KeNHA), the parastatal in charge of maintaining the country’s highways, says efforts to make the roads safer are in progress.

“It will take a while. It may be slow but every day something is happening. We will get there eventually,” says Mr Meshak Kidenda, head of KeNHA.

“For instance, in the next two to three months, we hope a majority of the 18 footbridges along Thika Road will be complete. But the question remains: will pedestrians be wise enough to use them?”