
The CAMBODIA DAILY

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Hun Sen Says More Die on Roads Than in War

by Khy Sovuthy and Simon Henderson | March 11, 2014

Road traffic accidents are killing more Cambodians per year than those who died annually as a result of war during their country's more than two decades of armed conflict, Prime Minister Hun Sen said Monday.

Speaking in Battambang province's Bavel district at the inauguration of the China-funded Road No. 57B, a new 176-km highway connecting National Road 5 to the Thai border in northwestern Battambang, Mr. Hun Sen used the analogy of war deaths to emphasize the huge impact of road traffic accidents—the number one cause of deaths, injuries and disability in the country.

"Even during the years of war people did not die every day, yet on average, more than five people die every day in Cambodia due to traffic accidents," he said at the ceremony, which was attended by Chinese Ambassador Bu Jianguo.

"So in 10 days, 50 or 60 people die. About 600 will die every 100 days and in one year, more than 2,000 people [die], with about 10,000 more injured," the Prime Minister said.

Mr. Hun Sen said that though the majority of Cambodians respected the traffic law and used the roads responsibly, 2 percent of careless drivers were causing accidents, putting the remaining 98 percent of road users at serious risk of injury or death.

"Please, I ask all people that even if we don't respect other people, respect your own lives," he said.

The new road project is one of three in northwestern Cambodia totaling 423 km—built with loans and grants from China using Chinese construction companies—that will develop the country's transnational roads to better connect the Asean region, Mr. Hun Sen said.

Ironically, better roads built over the past decade are seen as a contributing factor in the

increase in accidents and road deaths in Cambodia, while road safety groups argue that strict traffic law enforcement is necessary to bring about a change in dangerous driving behavior.

“Road improvement and rehabilitation are an important contributing factor of the increase of road crashes because they result in an increase of traveling speed and longer traveling distances,” said Ear Chariya, road safety program manager at Handicap International, Cambodia.

“Speeding accounts for over 50 percent of road deaths and is the leading cause of road crashes, and there is no road safety audit in Cambodia and no funding to improve the hotspots where road crashes very often occur.”

Preliminary figures from the Ministry of Interior for 2013 show a small increase in road deaths—1,901, compared to 1,894 in 2012, and last month, the government passed the National Policy on Road Safety, which will expand the existing Road Safety Action Plan for 2011 to 2020 with an increase in budget from \$2 million to \$10 million per year.

Mr. Chariya applauded the government for approving the national road safety policy, but said serious work is still required in order to translate this policy into action. And without proper enforcement of traffic laws and adequate investment, the number of casualties will continue to grow.

“The number of road fatalities in Cambodia has been estimated to increase up to 3,200 per annum by 2020,” he said.

In January, experts attending a meeting of the Bloomberg Philanthropies Global Road Safety Program in Cambodia said that the government’s decision to not enforce traffic laws since before the national election was undermining efforts by road safety groups in the country.

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