

Cambodia launches campaign to cut carnage on its roads

But government needs to rigorously enforce new law aimed at cutting number of deaths caused by accidents, which have doubled in a decade

Joe Freeman in Phnom Penh

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When Prum Neang joined the traffic police in Phnom Penh some 20 years ago, there were few vehicles on the roads.

In the mid-1980s, Cambodia was still recovering from the devastation of the Khmer Rouge, which had forced city residents into the countryside. Rare visitors to Phnom Penh gawked at the ghostly streets.

The situation today could not be more different. Large SUVs barrel down the wrong side of main thoroughfares at insane speeds, helmetless motorcyclists weave in and out of traffic, and reports of hit-and-runs often appear in the news.

Traffic accidents are a leading cause of death, while fatalities from landmines and malaria - frequently associated with Cambodia - are at historic lows. An average of six people die every day on the roads. The opposition leader has referred to the crisis as Cambodia's "Killing Roads."

Neang, 54, has had a front-row seat. "I notice that most people do not have mutual understanding, trying to overtake each other on the road, and driving in the opposite direction," he said, standing next to other traffic cops in their sky-blue uniforms on the corner of a major intersection.

He added: "When we direct the traffic, the people sometimes do not listen to us because they are in a hurry and think they need to go first."

In the past decade, annual traffic deaths have more than doubled in Cambodia, from 904 in 2005 to 2,148 so far this year, according to official statistics. In the same period, the population has risen some 15%, while vehicle registrations have gone up fourfold. Paved highways enabling faster driving have also increased the likelihood of accidents.

Traffic legislation, driver education and police enforcement have not kept pace. This month, however, Cambodian lawmakers passed a sweeping law that road safety advocates have been pushing for years.

Among other measures, the law, which needs to be approved by the senate and the King before a lengthy implementation period, makes it mandatory for passengers on motorbikes - not just the driver - to wear helmets. It also limits the number of passengers on a motorbike to one adult and one child, raises fines for drunk driving and ups sentencing rates for offenders.

Most drivers in Cambodia own motorbikes, hence the focus on helmets. According to the World Health Organisation, wearing a motorcycle helmet can lower the risk of death in a crash by almost 40% and decrease the risk of severe injury by more than 70%.

A 2012 survey on helmet use at five locations in Cambodia found that an average of only 25% of motorcyclists wore helmets at night, a time when the police presence is not as heavy and drinking is more widespread. When respondents were separately asked if they owned helmets, however, 97% said they did.

The new law is a major step forward, but because of low public trust in poorly paid traffic cops, who can often be seen taking money from road users for the slightest infraction, it risks the fate of other forward-thinking legislation in Cambodia: good on paper, useless in reality.

“Of course, the new traffic law will provide a stronger ground to address the key risk factors [for accidents],” said Ear Chariya, an independent road safety consultant who has worked with the government.

However, he added that more than good intentions were required. “This new law will bring more desired results for the road safety in Cambodia only if the government will take more serious actions to enforce the law.”

With the bureaucratic hurdles of passing the legislation cleared, all eyes are turning to the police officers who, like Neang, will be responsible for enforcing it.

Phnom Penh’s traffic police chief, Chev Hak, said that officials will begin instructing their colleagues in the capital and the provinces about the new law soon.

“This is our plan,” he said. “They will review the law and this is not difficult because firstly our traffic police officers have been practising the old law, but we will just inform or give them more training to tell them some new points so that they understand and have basic knowledge in their work and serve the public.”

Standing at his intersection, Neang said he had not seen the bill yet, but was encouraged by its measures, such as increased fines. But he added: “The amount of traffic and crashes is a lot, and this makes us very tired.”

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