

Global youth toll from road crashes equal to major war

Says UN report

AFP, Paris

More than 1,000 young people each day die on the road, a worldwide toll that inflicts indescribable yet avoidable suffering as well as spiralling economic costs, a UN report released on Thursday said.

The message is made in a report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) ahead of first UN "Global Road Safety Week," an event scheduled to start next Monday.

Every hour of every day, 40 youngsters around the world die after being hit by traffic or involved in a collision, WHO Director General Margaret Chan said.

"Road traffic crashes are not 'accidents,'" Chan said in a press release to promote the report. "We need to challenge the notion that they are unavoidable and make room for a pro-active, preventive approach."

In 2002, the latest year for which figures are available, 1.2 million people of all ages died on the road and between 20 and 50 million were injured.

People aged under 25 accounted for 383,046 of these fatalities. Among teenagers aged 15-19, it was the biggest single source of death and it ranked second among children aged five to nine and adults aged 20-24.

More than half of the fatalities were in Africa and Southeast Asia.

The report makes these recommendations:

-- promote road safety to children from a very young age.

-- encourage the wearing of cycle and motorbike helmets, child seats, seat belts and reflective clothing, especially in developing countries, which account for 85 percent of road fatalities.

-- separate motorised traffic from other users, such as animal-drawn carts and playing children, and use roundabouts and other schemes to "dampen" traffic speed.

-- get police to enforce laws on road safety, particularly those on drink-driving, helmet and seat-belt use.

-- consider setting lower blood-alcohol limits for young or inexperienced drivers and establishing a "graduated" system under which a young driver who has just passed his or her driving test is progressively released from restrictions after gaining experience.

On the other hand, the WHO casts doubt on the value of promoting "designated driver" schemes.

Under these campaigns, which are popular in many countries, youngsters going to a party or a club are encouraged to name one of their number as non-drinker for the evening, so that he or she can drive everyone home safely.

"There is... little evidence to suggest that designated driver programmes are effective in reducing drink-driving among young adults," the report says firmly.

"Most research on the subject indicates that these programmes are not enough to change behaviour by themselves, and that strict enforcement is also necessary."

In a commentary coinciding with the report, the British health journal The Lancet branded road deaths "a pandemic."

But it said there was no easy answer, as the chief solution "lies with what is perhaps one of the hardest things to change -- human behaviour."

The global cost of road accidents, among people of all ages, is put at 518 billion dollars a year, according to 2002 figures.

Low- and middle-income countries accounted for 65-100 billion dollars of this, which is more than they received in annual development aid and equivalent.

In terms of gross national product (GNP), the cost is one percent for low-income countries, which account for 85 percent of fatalities; 1.5 percent in middle-income countries; and two percent in high-income countries.

Richer countries have fewer accidents, but a crash incurs a higher dollar figure because of the greater costs in health care, insurance payouts, loss of earning capacity and contribution to the national economy.

Japan eyes tighter gun control rules

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's government said yesterday that it will consider tightening gun control rules after the murder of Nagasaki's mayor, as a new gun death rattled the country.

A man was shot dead outside a shop in suburban Tokyo, just three days after the mayor was gunned down in Nagasaki in a killing that has stunned a nation priding itself on its safety record.

Underworld gangs are linked to most gun violence here, including the death of mayor Ichio Ito, who was attacked by a gang member Tuesday in the southern Japanese city as he campaigned for re-election this weekend.

"We are in a serious situation in which crimes with guns are happening. It is extremely regrettable," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki told a news conference.

"We want to call on all ministries and agencies concerned to take proactive gun-control measures," said Shiozaki, the top spokesman for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Shiozaki said he will chair a "firearms eradication promotion conference" to hold its first meeting next week.

"This case we had in Nagasaki is literally a challenge to democracy," he said. "The Abe cabinet wants to take it seriously and will take action."

Japan already strictly controls guns, with only police and licensed hunters and some sportsmen allowed to own firearms.

It contrasts with the United States, where a mentally disturbed student's shooting rampage at a Virginia university that left 33 people dead this week has renewed debate over the nation's easy access to guns.

Thousands of China's dams are 'time bombs' waiting to burst

AFP, Beijing

Thousands of reservoirs in China are 'time bombs' waiting to burst, an official was quoted as saying yesterday, a day after a dam collapse forced the evacuation of 1,700 people.

"The problematic reservoirs are like time bombs, seriously threatening the lives and property of people living downstream," said Jiao Yong, deputy minister of water resources, according to the official Xinhua news agency.

On Thursday, 1,700 people had to be evacuated from four villages after a dam in northwest China's Gansu province was breached, causing water to flood

the surrounding area and destroying a highway bridge.

Jiao said all structurally unsound large, medium-sized and major small reservoirs nationwide would be repaired within three years.

The government would ensure the reinforcement and safety of the reservoirs, but it was a huge task, he said.

China has more than 85,000 reservoirs, of which 30,000 have serious structural problems, including 200 large and 1,600 medium-sized dams, Xinhua said.

China's dams and other efforts to control the country's frequently treacherous rivers have a long and tragic history.

In August 1975, a total of 62 dams in the central province of Henan either collapsed or were intentionally destroyed during a record rainstorm.

According to official statistics, at least 26,000 were killed and 10 million severely affected by the ensuing floods, which were kept secret for years. Experts have blamed faulty engineering for some of the dam failures.

Cracks in the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze river have raised concerns over construction quality of the world's largest hydroelectric project, built partly to aid flood control.

The government has said the cracks pose no problem and has carried out repairs.

Norway aims to be 'carbon neutral' state by 2050

AFP, Oslo

Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg on Thursday proposed to make Norway the first "carbon neutral" state by 2050 and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by 30 percent by 2020.

"We are committed to reducing our greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent by 2020," Stoltenberg said in a speech at his Labour Party's annual congress.

The pledge by Norway, which is not a member of the European Union, outshines the EU's proposed plan to cut its emissions by at least 20 percent

during the same period.

Stoltenberg urged his party to make environmental history and said: "By 2050 even larger reductions will be necessary. The wealthy countries must become zero emission states."

"Norway would become the first country in the world to adopt such a concrete measure," he said.

"This means that for every tonne of greenhouse gases that is discharged we will make sure that the equivalent amount has to be reduced somewhere else," he continued, referring to a compensation mechanism outlined in the

Kyoto Protocol.

In the short term, the prime minister said Norway's emissions would by 2012 be reduced by 10 percent more than what is required by the Kyoto Protocol.

A white book on Norway's fight against climate change is due to be presented to the Norwegian parliament next month.

Norway -- the third largest exporter of oil and natural gas, fossil fuels seen as one of the main causes of global warming -- already covers almost all of its electricity needs with "clean energy" from hydropower.

Mystery yacht found without crew off Australia

AFP, Sydney

A yacht has been found drifting off the Australian coast with computers running and a table laid for a meal -- but no sign of the crew, puzzled officials said yesterday.

The 12-metre catamaran was spotted by a customs helicopter about 80 nautical miles off Townsville on Australia's northeast coast, near the outer Great Barrier Reef on Thursday, national radio reported.

The discovery that the yacht was unmanned sparked a major sea and air search for the three crew, two men in their 60s and one aged 56.

Emergency Management Queensland spokesman Jon Hall said rescue crews were puzzled by what they found aboard the yacht because "everything appeared normal".

"The engine was running, the computers were running, there was a laptop set up on the table which was running, the radio was working, the GPS was working and there was food and utensils set on the table ready to eat, but no sign of the crew," he said.

"It was a bit strange."

Police said one of the crewmen is believed to have bought the catamaran, KAZ II, at Airfie Beach south of Townsville and the three planned to travel home to Western Australia around the northern coastline.

Hall said the boat's GPS system had been retrieved and the data would be analysed for clues to the mysterious disappearance of the crew.

"That will now enable us to track backwards where this yacht has actually been in the last few days, and we're hoping that can pinpoint the search area for the missing crew," he said.

All the boat's sails were up but one was badly shredded, while three life jackets and survival equipment, including an emergency beacon, were found on board.

Police Chief Superintendent Roy Wall said there was nothing to indicate the yacht had capsized at any stage.

"There's nothing on board to indicate there's been any great disaster. The vessel is upright and certainly in reasonably good condition."

"At this stage it's just a mystery."

Water police were towing the yacht to Townsville, where it would be subjected to a forensic examination, Wall said.

"The weather on Sunday, Monday wasn't too good -- there was a fair sort of a wind blowing out there. But it's improved since then, so who knows what could have happened."