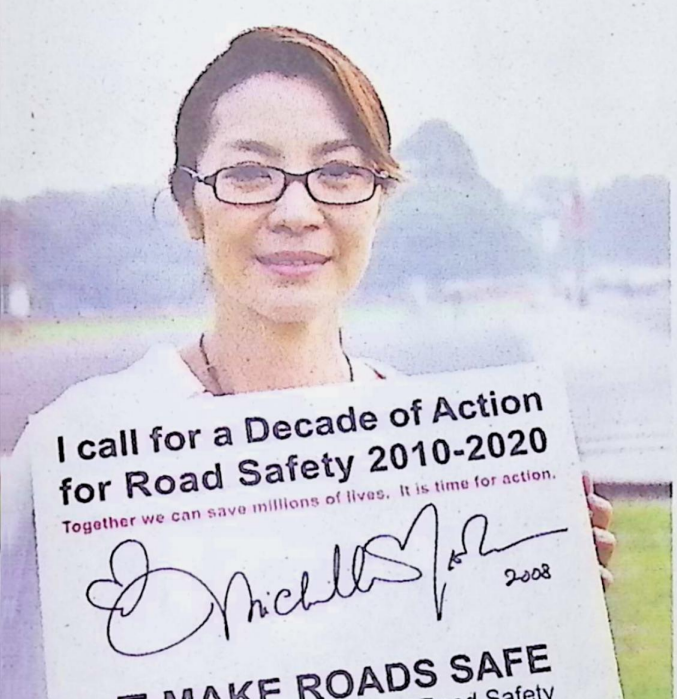


Film star Michelle Yeoh calls for a Decade of Action for Road Safety.

ries are the leading cause of unintentional death to children 10 - 19 years of age and the second leading cause of injury related death for children between 5 - 9 years of age.

Efforts are underway to stem the tide of death and disability. Make Roads Safe is a global road safety campaign established with the aim of securing political commitment for road traffic injury prevention around the world. The Make Roads Safe campaign played a leading role in arguing for and securing the first ever United Nations Ministerial Conference on global road safety, which was approved by the UN General Assembly on 31st March 2008 and will be held in Moscow in November 2009.

"Every six seconds someone is killed or maimed on the world's roads," says Lord Robertson, former British defense minister, chair of the Make Roads Safe campaign and himself an automobile crash survivor. "Every six seconds we have another powerful reason to demand that the international community works to make our roads safe".

Road accidents are predictable and therefore preventable. Safety measures that could work well in the Bangladesh context might include:

- Promoting road safety through mobile road shows. Multimedia projectors can be used to screen hard-hitting movie clips, and plays. Target: schools, roadside markets, bus and truck depots.
- Cracking down on fake licenses. Make refresher training mandatory for commercial drivers.
- Reviewing the performance of the Highway Police. This branch was set up to improve safety and security on our highways. It is part of their brief to take action against speeding, dangerous driving, overloading etc. It is clear they have not lived up to their mandate.
- Preventing non-motorised vehicles such as rickshaws from travelling on the high-speed carriageway. They must use the paved shoulder cum rickshaw lane. It should be strictly illegal to travel without a lamp, and the rear panel must be painted yellow or silver. The highway police should enforce these rules.
- Buckle up, Wear Helmets, and Be Seen, Be Safe campaigns. Seat belts, helmets and bright clothing at night can dramatically improve road safety.
- Identification and special attention to "black spots" places where crashes frequently happen.
- Overhauling the BRTA.

The government in Bangladesh must take action to reduce road crash injuries through a combination of tougher enforcement of traffic safety rules, public awareness and safer road infrastructure. Now is the time to ensure that all road infrastructure investments have road safety impact assessments included at the design stage. This is being done for environmental aspects of such projects, but safety aspects continue to be neglected. Bangladesh must also develop its own national road safety strategy.

But this is a global epidemic that requires a global effort. Strategists have correctly observed that many developing countries need international assistance if they are to improve road safety and develop their own home-grown technical expertise. The Commission for Global Road Safety suggests the solution: a ten year, $300 million Action Plan, combined with a global target to cut by 50% the predicted increase in global road deaths between 2010 - 2020.

The 'first UN ministerial summit on road safety' will begin on 19th November 2009, at the Kremlin in Moscow. The slogan for the conference: 'Time for Action'. Road safety advocacy groups such as Make Roads Safe are calling on governments across the world to support a 'Decade of Action for Road Safety' along the lines of the UN campaign to roll back malaria.

Among those who have backed the call for a "Decade of Action" are Costa Rica's Nobel Peace Prize winning President, Óscar Arias Sánchez, and former US President Bill Clinton. "We will be working hard to ensure that when governments meet in November at the UN Conference in Moscow, they don't just talk, but they also act" said Michelle Yeoh, Global Ambassador for the Make Roads Safe Campaign.

It is hoped that the summit will push road safety up the political agenda, and kick-start a concerted effort to curb road death.

It is vital that Bangladesh is represented in Moscow by a strong team led by our Minister for Communication. Investing political capital and financial resources in safer roads today will prevent countless human tragedies, enhance public health and lift people out of poverty. It is time Bangladesh joined the global fight back against this epidemic on wheels. We simply cannot afford to miss the bus. ■