Traffic Warnings, Increased Accidents, and Complaints about Public Transportation in Cuba

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Traffic Warnings, Increased Accidents, and Complaints about Public Transportation in Cuba

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The number of traffic accidents, one of the leading causes of death in Cuba, soared this year to the highest level in more than a decade despite warnings from authorities against drunk-driving and the lack of road-safety education. Meanwhile, the public complains about the capital’s deteriorating public-transportation service, the problems of aging automobiles, and the condition of the road system.

Since the early 1990s, when the island suffered a severe economic downturn following the loss of its Eastern European allies, public transportation has faced repeated declines in urban centers like Havana, as well as in the interprovincial service.

For years, the communist government has tried to ease the public-transportation crisis by importing foreign-made buses, some of which are secondhand and often end up out of service because of the lack of maintenance and spare parts. This happens even though they come from countries like Russia and China, which maintain good relations with the communist government.

Travelling on the island is a true odyssey, especially in the nation’s capital with its 2 million plus inhabitants, where accidents skyrocketed in the 1990s partly because of a massive increase in the number of bicycles and the overcrowded public buses that sometimes have passengers hanging from the doors and windows.

Five years ago, the government promised to invest US$1 million in public transportation, but today Havana has less than half the promised 1,000 buses in its fleet. This situation is mitigated through the increasing use of private taxis, whose numbers have climbed since the end of 2010 when President Raúl Castro’s government began to encourage self-employment (NotiCen, June 28, 2012).

Death on the roads
Traffic accidents rank fifth among the causes of death in Cuba. In the first half of this year, traffic accidents rose to 5,637, resulting in 363 deaths and 4,388 injuries. These are the highest figures in the last 12 years, according to the Dirección Nacional de Tránsito (DNT). With 11.2 million people on the island, there were 10,553 recorded accidents in 2011, 11% more than during the previous year.

Drunk driving is one of the main causes of accidents, along with reckless driving, speeding, and inadequate driver education. One in five drivers are driving under the influence of alcohol, say the authorities, who introduced a new highway code in 2011 with tougher measures for violations and for speeding.

The authorities recognize that many vehicles are not in condition to be driven. During a one-and-a-half-month period during the summer of 2012, automobile inspections found 2,300 vehicles with mechanical problems and unfit for driving. It is common to see old cars driving noisily down the road leaving a cloud of burnt oil in their wake.
Cuban cities lack subways and suburban trains, and their streets often have holes in the asphalt and traffic lights out of service from electrical outages. Driving in Cuba means being ready to make quick maneuvers to dodge the baches (potholes). Some embassies advise their citizens not to drive but to hire a local driver instead.

Every time the urban transportation crisis intensifies, there is an increase of cyclists, horse-drawn carriages, and human-powered vehicles. Families of three can be seen riding on a bicycle with all of their paraphernalia needed for work and school. "My wife, daughter, and I are terrified while traveling by bicycle, because drivers ignore road safety," said Joaquín, an engineer in the Cerro district, whose family vehicle is an old Chinese iron bicycle.

The travel nightmare

Travelling on the periphery of Havana is torture, especially when waiting for a city bus. Official data shows there are less than 500 public buses in the capital. The long wait at a crowded bus stop in the tropical heat is the best political thermometer for measuring the public’s opinion of the government.

"The harshest proclamations of social discontent I’ve heard are at the bus stop whenever the public buses don’t arrive, or pass by because they are too crowded, or are out of service when everyone wants to get home after work," said a university professor living in the Havana neighborhood of Lawton, who all too often fears that he will not arrive on time to class.

A typical 15-minute drive from the outskirts of Havana becomes a 40-minute journey after an hour or two of waiting for a bus. The hardship of using public transportation is one reason that many Cubans have changed jobs or abandoned the state sector, which remains the largest employer.

Official data indicates a decrease in the state-run bus service: in the first half of 2012, there were 10.9 million fewer passengers than the 454.1 million transported during the same period in 2011. Trips by rail, sea, and air are 0.6%, 0.2% and 0.1%, respectively, of the number who traveled by bus. Hauling freight or transporting passengers is the second most successful type of private business, followed by food sales.

Bus passengers protest silently by not paying the fare despite its subsidized price of 40 centavos (about US$.02). Often the drivers do not even flinch when riders do not put the required fare into the collection box.

Foolproof Chevrolets

For those without access to hard currency, a trip to the inland provinces means buying a ticket weeks in advance for the sporadic departures of buses and trains. The public buses are responsible for 43% of the transfers while 39.3% are through alternative means, including private. It is a great luxury to privately own a car on the island.

An American-made car from the 1940s or 1950s can cost US$15,000 despite its high gasoline use and lack of spare parts. The excessive price is the result of the limited import of modern vehicles and their growing use as collective taxis that traverse the main avenues of cities such as Havana.

Traveling in one of those taxis, known as almendrones, costs ten pesos (US$.40). The average salary is US$15 a month, scarcely enough to take a taxi every day for a month. Nevertheless, it is a handy solution for emergencies or for those who have the extra income, even though six passengers must cram in with the driver.

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A veritable army of machinists and mechanics adapt parts from Russia, China, Italy, Korea, and even those sent by relatives from the émigré community in Florida. It is estimated that more than 70,000 cars made between 1920 and 1950 are still in use on the island. Their use is so intense that sometimes several drivers use the same car in shifts throughout the day.

The common dream of many of these taxi drivers is to rent the car for a while to tourists from the US, who pay in dollars and are fascinated by the longevity of the Chevrolets, Pontiacs, and Cadillacs that still run, thanks, paradoxically, to communism.

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