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Old Cars, Bad Roads, and Traffic Violations Cause Accidents and Economic Loss in Cuba

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Old streets, unmaintained highways, an ancient fleet of automobiles, and traffic violations have combined to cause a large number of fatal accidents as well as economic losses in Cuba, a disturbing turn of events for the population at a time when internal economic reforms and the influx of tourism necessitate greater movement of goods and passengers through the island.

Horse-drawn carriages, ox carts, bicycle taxis, 60-year-old American cars and other vehicles imported three decades ago from the former socialist camp are common on Cuban roadways. They are a daily reminder of the instability of the transportation system, part of a crisis that has also affected the national railroad and airline systems since the island lost the subsidies it once received from the former Eastern European communist bloc (NotiCen, Sept. 27, 2012).

In 2015, the island recorded a daily average of two deaths, 22 injuries, and 30 accidents, according to the local press. At least half of those accidents were the result of violations of traffic laws and the rest were due to speeding, to drivers’ losing control of their vehicles, to mechanical malfunctions, and to poor road conditions, the Cuban media reported. The publication of accident statistics is part of an official campaign to alert the public about the dangers that Cuban roads pose.

Other identified causes of traffic accidents are negligence, lack of discipline, and lack of driving skills. The aging population is also blamed. As the state-owned Radio Reloj recently reported, "our society is aging; people's reflexes are slower and there is greater risk of causing or being in an accident." More than 140 accidents in 2015 were attributed to the use of alcoholic beverages.

Economic loss from traffic accidents is estimated to be more than 500 million pesos (about US$18.9 million) annually, the National Road Safety Commission reported in December. Of the vehicles involved in collisions, 60% belong to the state. Most of the accidents occur on Fridays.

A legacy of the ‘special period’
During what was officially known as the "special period" in Cuba, which began with the abrupt fall of communism in Europe in the early 1990s, the country was left without petroleum and spare automobile parts. The economy was paralyzed and transportation in the cities and between the provinces became a nightmare. People had to walk for miles to get to work, and many began to use Chinese-made bicycles in the cities, even riding them in the dark, which added to the accident toll (NotiSur, Feb. 25, 1992, and Aug. 6, 1992).

That economic crisis left its scars, not only on transportation services, but also on the actual condition of vehicles, highways, and road signs. According to estimates, a third of the vehicles driven on the island have mechanical problems; many of the taxis on the regular routes in Havana were imported from the United States before 1959 and often leave behind a telltale cloud of soot.
Deterioration of roads and signals

Authorities publicly admit that the roads are deteriorating faster than the government is able to repair and maintain them. The condition of 76% of the nation's roads is rated as somewhere between middling and bad. The country's infrastructure has received limited investment in the last three decades due to the lack of funds, sources from the Transportation Ministry explained to the Cuban Parliament during the closing of its annual session last December.

The dissemination of accident statistics and the warnings from the authorities coincide with recent reports of the possible filming in Cuba of an installment of the Fast and Furious series, fueled by the US film industry's curiosity about the island after the recent renewal of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015). The reports have been a source of bewilderment for many Cubans, who know the condition of their poorly illuminated, pothole-filled streets.

Road maintenance is limited by a lack of materials, equipment, and labor force. Some of the main thoroughfares are repaired only when Cuba expects important visitors, such as foreign leaders or the Pope, when buildings facades are also given new coats of paint. Nonetheless, the occasional repairs don't solve the underlying problems, such as the numerous cracks in water lines that break up the asphalt from below and that also affect the amount of water pumped in the nation’s capital.

Given the propensity of Havana residents to view the challenges of daily life with humor, when they give directions to their homes, they often add information about road bumps, potholes, and other traffic obstacles. Frequently, they circulate photos of giant potholes being used as bathtubs by neighborhood teenagers during intense rains. Luckily for drivers, the residents are in the habit of posting homemade signs warning of these massive potholes.

The authorities have denounced the theft of aluminum road signs for the clandestine manufacture of handicrafts, tourist souvenirs, windows, and grills, and even for sale as raw materials. The situation became a crisis in 2009, when the government announced that more than 375,000 traffic signs were missing from Cuban streets and highways, the result of deterioration or theft. Likewise, vandals show no mercy, stealing wooden railroad ties, the rails from railroad tracks, and guardrails and sheet metal from bridges.

Negligence and losses

The island's accidents do not make it to the pages of foreign newspapers unless a foreigner is involved, or when the circumstances are unusual, for example, when animals are required to tow the wrecked vehicles, or when the vehicle involved is a freight truck converted into a passenger transport to ferry people between the provinces. Yet traffic accidents are the fifth greatest cause of death in Cuba, responsible for more than six deaths per 100,000 people a year. The island's population is a little more than 11 million.

The Cuban road accident most widely discussed in the international press in recent years has been the death in 2012 of two dissidents in eastern Cuba. One of them was Oswaldo Payá, the Catholic founder of the Movimiento Cristiano Liberación (Christian Liberation Movement, MCL) (NotiCen, Feb. 20, 2003), who was traveling with a Swede, Jens Aron Modig, then-chairman of the Young Christian Democrats of Sweden, and a Spaniard, Ángel Carromero, of the Spanish People's Party's youth organization, Nuevas Generaciones. Carromero was behind the wheel. The incident sparked
controversy about road and signage conditions, as well as allegations that the wreck was not an accident at all, but an assassination of the well-known dissident.

Among the subjects that Raúl Castro’s government faces in its desire to reform the economy is the road situation, the transportation system and the challenge to make it efficient and capable of guaranteeing the transfer of foodstuffs from the fields into the cities, as much for the Cuban population as for the growing number of international tourists arriving in the island. International tourism is bringing in more than three million visitors each year, many of whom choose not to lock themselves away in beach resorts, but rather prefer to travel independently through cities and rural areas.

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