

# Road accidents cost India \$20 bn every year

India suffers a staggering hit of Rs.1 lakh crore (\$20 billion) every year due to road accidents, according to the International Road Federation (IRF), which says the country lacks “political will” to tackle the menace.

“The losses due to road accidents have crossed Rs.1 lakh crore annually. The sad part is the establishment knows it. These figures are present in their own records and despite this, there’s no political will to resolve the problem,” IRF president K.K. Kapila told IANS. IRF is a non-profit organisation working for development and maintenance of better and sustainable roads and road networks.

According to Planning Commission studies during 2001-2003, that is nearly a decade ago, the total losses to the economy due to road accidents in the year 1999-2000 were pegged at Rs.55,000 crore (about \$10 billion), some three percent of the country’s GDP.

Kapila’s numbers mean the losses have almost doubled in the last decade. The losses take into account victim-related costs, property damage and administration costs. He said stringent checks should be established to curb rising drunken driving.

“The Supreme Court judgment calling for stringent punishments for drunken driving, especially when the driver kills someone, is exemplary but we need to follow the ruling in letter and spirit,” he said. However, “the entire environment is polluted”, he claimed, citing the short temper on roads and low regard for traffic rules, by both motorists and pedestrians. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) says 130,000 people were killed in road accidents in 2010.

At a recent conference on road safety, Delhi Joint Commissioner of Police (Traffic) Satyendra Garg agreed that many of the penalties set by the old Motor Vehicle Act of 1988 were outdated. Giving last year’s data, Garg said police had nabbed some 800,000 traffic violators but archaic penalties weren’t enough to deter the culprits.

However, the lack of regard for traffic rules and nominal fines were just part of the bigger jigsaw puzzle, said Harman Singh Siddhu of ArriveSafe, an NGO working for road safety. “The UN declared 2011-2020 as ‘Decade of Action for Road Safety’. But not even a token event was held in India. This shows our seriousness about the issue,” he said. He added that the National Road Safety and Traffic Management Board Bill has yet to see the light of day, even though “India accounts for about 10 percent of road accident fatalities, despite having only one percent of the world’s vehicle population”.

The bill seeks to establish a panel for the development and regulation of road safety, traffic management system and safety standards in highway design and construction. Even countries like Vietnam, Cambodia and Uganda have adopted Global Helmet Vaccine Initiative with positive results but the lack of dedication on the part of policymakers has kept the country’s road safety record dismal, Siddhu claimed.

The initiative aims to promote helmet wearing in two-wheeler riders across the world, working in partnership with governments, the private sector and NGOs (India Current Affairs 19-2-12).