

United Nations Coordination Meeting for Road Safety



Remarks by

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I would like first to thank Jean for convening this vitally important meeting and for his leadership on this issue.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the carriage of the Marquis St. Evrémonde speeds recklessly through the streets of Paris, and runs over a child. Showing no remorse, the Marquis simply tosses a coin to the grief-stricken father of the child as the carriage drives on. But let me suggest that this was no “accident.” Rather, it was a violation of what we now know to be *human rights*.

In Dicken’s 18th Century Parisian setting, the people have no voice, no power, no recourse, no justice. They are anything but rights-holders, and, therefore, there are none that hold duties to them. Beyond maintaining a modicum of order, the State and its agents feel no compulsion to provide for the common good, including the safety of the public, public health, or the protection of vulnerable groups in society. Investment in public infrastructure is largely limited to ensuring military defence and facilitating commerce and thus the wealth of the French monarchy. There is no right to development. There is no right to life that imposes obligations on the State. No right to health. No right to personal security. The community has no meaningful voice in determining needed improvements for their own safety. And justice for a common person trampled by an aristocrat could certainly not be expected from the State. What was reflective of a truth expressed in a celebrated novel is still the reality in many parts of the world.

So, yes, road safety is **a human rights question**.

Today, **international law**, codified under *United Nations* auspices, imposes **affirmative obligations** on every State to take all reasonable steps to protect the **right to life, the right to personal security, the right to health, and the right to development** of all people against all threats in both the **public and private spheres**.

These obligations include **prevention**, thorough adequate regulation of and investment in safe and accessible infrastructure, including roads and public transportation as well as the implementation of safety standards when it comes to vehicles in private use.

They include **response**, with effective public services, including emergency services.

They include meaningful frameworks for free and active **participation**, like public hearings on planning and budgeting.

They require **accountability**, remedies, and **redress**, through the fair and effective administration of justice.

And they mandate an explicit focus on **access** and **inclusion**, without discrimination, particularly for those most vulnerable or marginalized—women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons, those living in poverty, minorities, and others.

And let me suggest that road safety is a human rights issue beyond road **traffic** safety. Across the globe, millions of girls and women face sexual harassment on public transport and at mass transit stops. They routinely report facing verbal abuse, unwanted sexual comments,

groping, being flashed at, and physical assault on roads and in public transport. **Women face these threats in all areas of the world**, as a 2014 poll by the Thomson Reuters Foundation revealed.

According to that poll, in some capitals in Latin America, six of every 10 women reported being physically assaulted on buses and trains. In London, 32% of women reported verbal harassment on public transport and 19% were victims of direct physical abuse. In India, more than 50% expressed serious concerns about the safety of their commute.

As we move this year to craft a new urban agenda at the Habitat III in October 2016, these figures should sound some alarm bells because fear has dramatic consequences for women's behaviour. **This translates into girls missing school, women giving up job offers, or even being unable to access essential healthcare services.**

But if this is a human rights question, then the imperatives that follow from it are *universal* imperatives, and cannot depend on whether the roads that one is compelled to travel are in a rich country or a poor country. And, as we have seen, and as Jean has said plainly, ninety percent of all road fatalities occur in **developing countries**, where safe and accessible infrastructure, transport, and emergency and health services are lacking. In these places, people sometimes load vehicles beyond their capacity or operate unsafe vehicles, not as a matter of choice but necessity.

Here, the importance of the **right to development** and of **international cooperation** becomes evident, as does the wisdom of the **SDGs**—targeted as they are to halving **road deaths and injuries**, and to providing safe and accessible **public transport**. For these reasons, we cannot but join the SG and his Special Envoy in supporting the proposal to establish a **United Nations Road Safety Fund**. I am also pleased to note that the UN Interagency Task Force on Non-communicable Diseases, recognising the obvious link between health and road safety, has taken an interest in broader UN system engagement in this area and is considering the establishment of a Thematic Group within the Task Force.

From our side, **OHCHR** works to strengthen the **capacities of duty bearers**, especially the state, to meet its obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the rights to life, to health, to personal security, to equality and to development. And we work to strengthen the space for **rights holders** to enjoy those rights.

We advocate **human rights-based approaches** to infrastructure development and to urbanization, with a focus on participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, and alignment with international human rights standards.

We press for **accessibility for persons with disabilities**, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which sees the failure to remove barriers to the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities as a manifestation of discrimination.

And we work to advance **full, safe, and equal access** and enjoyment of public services, infrastructure, transport, and programmes, for all people, **without discrimination** as to race, sex, language, religion, indigenous, minority, or migrant status, age, or sexual orientation or gender identity. **I thank you.**