

THINK BOX



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MAKE OUR ROADS SAFER

While a campaign to reduce the speed of vehicles on roads to save lives was observed across the world last week, the government of Thailand seems to be moving in the opposite direction.

It announced plans to increase the speed limit on 12 additional national and rural highways with changes expected to roll out over the next three months.

Since April, drivers have been allowed to legally increase their speed from 90km/h to 120km/h on certain parts of particular highways that have four lanes with a median barrier and no U-turn points. Transport Minister Sak-sayam Chidchob tested the waters first by introducing the new regulation on a 50km stretch of Highway 32, starting from Bang Pa-in district in Ayutthaya to Ang Thong province.

At first, the plan was meant to be a two-month trial. However, in mid-May, or about 1.5 months after testing the new regulation, the minister described the new limit as a success. He reasoned that the traffic was flowing well and even stated that "no one was complaining" about the speed limit increase.

Within seven years, the minister plans to implement the new speed limit on 47 more roads. However, his announcement of success may have come too soon. If you ask around, people believe that they can drive up to 120km/h on any highway regardless of which stretch they are on.

In addition, motorists who use expressways will likely be able to enjoy faster speeds soon too. The Royal Thai Police wants to follow the new speed limit set by the minister and is planning to increase the speed limit on expressways from 80km/h to 100km/h.

The idea of increasing the speed limit is quite absurd. Even data provided by the Department of Highways shows that 69% of 1,157 accidents in February alone were the result of speeding, resulting in 156 fatalities and 884 injuries.

It is widely known that there is a link between speed and accidents. A higher speed leads to more damages and more severe road crashes. The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported that an increase in the average speed of 1km/h results in a 3% higher risk of a crash and a 4%-5% increase in fatalities.

Moreover, people tend to drive faster than the speed limit, even after it is raised to 120km/h. Research on European road safety found the reasons linked to accidents usually involved typical excuses such as being in a rush, driving fast for fun, or boredom.

In Thailand, the situation might be worse because motorists do not respect rules and enforcement is weak. Signboards of the speed limits along the road mean nothing. Cars do not slow down when they drive near a school zone that requires a speed limit of 30km/h. Some do not even stop at a zebra crossing to allow pedestrians to cross.

If you follow the rule on an expressway that has a speed limit at 80km/s, the car behind you will likely honk or even flash their lights as if you were impeding traffic.

Thais do not take traffic rules seriously. It is sad but true that the system allows us to take traffic laws lightly from the very start of acquiring a driving licence (you can let money talk to get your licence and this is another problem contributing to fatalities).

Every year, traffic police issue millions of tickets to speeding drivers. Between January to December 2020,

the police issued more than 15.8 million tickets to those who drove over the speed limit. The total number of violations increased 33% from the 11.8 million tickets issued in 2019. The fun fact is that out of those who received traffic tickets, only about 18% paid fines in 2019, and 17.7% did so in 2020.



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built for motorists
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What happened to the offenders who did not pay the fines you might be wondering? Nothing is the answer.

Elsewhere in the world when traffic violations and fatality rates are high, governments react by implementing measures to slow vehicles down. In Spain, for example, the speed limit on all two-lane urban roads was reduced from 50km/h to 30km/h after its government noticed the fatality rate was 6%.

Last week, the WHO called on governments to limit speeds to 30km/h on streets in community areas because this reduces the risk of fatal accidents by five times.

Some may argue that 30 km/h is too slow but remember it is the speed in a city where pedestrians including children and the elderly also need to use the road safely. The policymakers must realise that the road is not only built for motorists alone but for everyone to use.

Perhaps, we can make our voice heard by signing an open letter to support the Streets For Life campaign (#Love30) at unroadsafetyweek.org/en/get-involved#sign. Little by little, change will come.

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