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United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

Press Release ECE/TRANS/07/P03
Geneva, 17 April 2007

Young Road Users in the UN Spotlight

Over 300 young people 18-24 years old representing about 100 countries will gather in Geneva on 23 and 24 April 2007 for a World Youth Assembly on Road Safety.

Following a UN General Assembly model, young people will discuss how best the safety of young road users can be achieved. They will also adopt a declaration aimed at raising the awareness of their peers, policy makers, parents, teachers and the media, about the daily tragedy on the roads, of which young people are the victims.

The World Youth Assembly will be the central event of the First United Nations Global Road Safety Week (23-29 April 2007), jointly organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Regional Commissions, and targeted at young road users, including young drivers.

“Modelled on the previous UNECE Road Safety Weeks, the first Global Road Safety Week will provide UN Member States with a common framework for launching simultaneous national and local road safety campaigns, aimed at improving the safety of young road users and road safety in general”, said José Capel Ferrer, Director, Transport Division, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

Road accidents are a major cause of death for young people aged 5-24 years. Young drivers are prone to overestimate their own capabilities as well as those of their vehicle, and despite numerous campaigns, they continue to pay a heavy toll in road accidents, especially at weekends.

Statistics show that young people are over-represented in road accidents. Young people from 18-24 years represent about 10% of the population but 25% of those killed in road accidents around the world¹. In the UNECE region² alone more than 29,000 between the ages of 0-24 years are killed every year on the roads.

But the First UN Road Safety Week also aims to improve road safety in general. In Western Europe the long-term trends are quite positive. In the past 30-40 years, on average, the number of people killed on the roads per year has been halved, while road traffic has increased by a factor of 4.

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As a pioneer international organization in the area of road safety, the UNECE has contributed to this achievement. It has done so through the development of uniform regulations for the various components of road traffic, firstly for the road user through harmonized traffic rules, signs and signals, but also for vehicles and the road infrastructure itself.

However, still in 2004, about 104,000 people were killed on European roads. There are large disparities in the distribution of road deaths and injuries in countries and groupings of countries. Relative to the number of vehicles registered, the number of fatalities in the new EU-12 countries was about 3 times higher than in the EU-15. But where the situation is the worst is in the CIS countries where such ratio is about 10 times higher than in the EU-15.

Bad roads and old unsafe vehicles can be considered to be still major causes for such high numbers of victims in these countries. However, in all countries, studies have shown that incorrect human behaviour is the main cause of accidents. Excessive speed, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and users not wearing safety belts or helmets are the main behaviour related risk factors in road deaths and injuries.

Improving behaviour requires, not only appropriate safety rules, but also the political will to respect them and to have them respected, adequate training and education, and information campaigns.

“The results achieved in Western Europe prove something which is very important: that road accidents can be prevented and lives saved. This should not lead us to complacency, but on the contrary, to redouble our efforts to save more lives. I hope that the First UN Global Road Safety Week will be a major step in this direction”, added Mr. José Capel Ferrer.

For further information see: www.unece.org/trans/globalroadsafetyweek or contact:

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¹ In the UNECE region these percentages are 7% and 17% respectively.

² The UN Economic Commission for Europe comprises 56 countries, including all European countries, the Commonwealth of Independent States and North America.