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TRAFFIC IN VIETNAM: THE "DREAM" HAS BECOME A NIGHTMARE

Pham Thi Thuy, a twenty-year old student in Ho Chi Minh City just returned from the funeral of a classmate killed by a speeding motorcyclist who ran a red light. This was Ms. Thuy's third acquaintance in the past year whose life was cut short by a traffic accident. While Ms. Thuy is a careful driver she is afraid every time she uses her Chinese-made motorbike to commute to school.

When Nguyen Van Anh, 45, felt a pain in his chest and began coughing heavily, his wife advised him to see a doctor. The results of his examination revealed he had been inflicted with a minor lung disease caused by "working in hazardous conditions." Mr. Anh is a tailor with a small shop on the Nga Tu Ao intersection which is one of the busiest in Hanoi, and traffic jams are a daily occurrence.

Fifteen years ago, motorized traffic in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City consisted of a few thousand motorbikes and a few large vehicles. The air was fresh and the streets quiet and orderly. Bicycles were the principal mode of transportation and a traffic light was practically nowhere to be found.

Walk down the streets of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City today and the first thing that you notice is the traffic chaos. Try and cross the street at any intersection and it can be a death-defying experience. While there are now traffic lights at most major intersections, many drivers simply ignore them, particularly at night. Be sure to look both ways when crossing a one-way street since it is common to find drivers going the wrong way.

Although traffic regulations exist concerning such which side of the road to pass on, these rules are often complexly ignored. The horn appears to be more important than the brakes when driving, and many drivers expect others to get out of the way as they barrel down the road at speeds far exceeding the limit. Fresh air in the cities is a thing of the past replaced by the less than fragrant smell of exhaust fumes.

Though the growth rate of the economy have been extremely impressive since the country embarked on *doi moi* in 1986, the growth rate of motorbike use has been even more. While the entire country had only 500,000 motorbikes in 1992, it is now estimated that Hanoi alone currently has close to a million motorbikes and 100,000 cars, buses and trucks. Ho Chi Minh City's traffic woes are even worse with over 1.5 million motorbikes on the streets.

The increasing number of vehicles on the road is not necessarily a negative sign since it reflects the increasing affluence of the country due to its rapidly strengthening economy. A number of years ago

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for most Vietnamese, owning a motorbike was literally and figuratively a Honda "dream" for $2000. The proliferation of less expensive imports and competing domestic made products now make the two or three motorbike household a more common occurrence. Chinese motorbikes, for example, are available for less than VND6 million, one-fifth the price of motorbike ownership a decade ago.

In attempt to satisfy this demand for motorbikes, still a status symbol for a majority of the population, the 51 local and foreign-owned producers in Vietnam manufactured close to two million units in 2001. In 1999, 450,000 motorbikes were imported into Vietnam. These figures increased to 1.1 million in 2000 and will be more than 2 million in 2002.

This increase in motor vehicle usage, however, has not come without a cost to society, and today, Vietnam has one of the world's highest traffic accident rates. Despite September 2002 being designated as traffic safety month, the number of traffic deaths for the period rose from a year earlier. Traffic related fatalities for 2002 are expected to be close to 11,000 and road accident injury growth rates are in double figures.

Since motorbike drivers are blamed for 70 percent of traffic accidents and close to 80 per cent of road accidents are attributed to drivers violating traffic law, poor driving appears to be one of the main culprits behind the nation's road toll.

The Ministry of Transportation and Communication (MoTC) calculates the loss of productivity and time due to traffic congestion at over $270 million per year in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, This is in addition to the noise and air pollution, which most certainly will have long run health consequences.

Given the gravity of the problem, government and private-sector officials have offered various proposals to address the traffic situation. Some more prominent are:

- Decrease the density of vehicles in the busiest streets during rush hour. Rearrange starting times of various activities to avoid rush hours.
- The establishment of an information center providing the latest information on traffic congestion so drivers can make alternative arrangements.
- Make public transportation a higher priority. Increase the percentage of use to 50 percent by 2010 from the present 4 percent.
- Limit the use of individual vehicles. Apply additional fees (such as taxes) to motorbikes and bicycles.
- Move industrial enterprises to the outskirts of cities to decrease the number of workers and migrant entering city centers.
- The halting of vehicle imports.
- Limiting parking for motor vehicles.

Hanoi's Deputy Mayor recommends that motorbikes and cars be barred from some parts or streets of the city and Ho Chi Minh City's party chief says the city should discourage people from using private transport.

Director of Hanoi's Planning and Investment Department has a different idea. He says, it would be better to spend funds to build satellite town to relocate people from the main city areas.

The majority of these proposals, however, will involve a high cost in terms of time and money.

Regarding the use of mass transport, for example, the Hanoi People's committee announced plans in October 2002 to invest up to US172 million to set up a pilot monorail designed to carry between 15

and 18 million passengers a year. Meanwhile, officials in Ho Chi Minh City are mapping out plans to increase public transport facilities such as buses, metro and cable systems with the goal of carrying 15 percent of computer by 2005 and 70 percent by 2020.

Nevertheless, financing these projects, however, remains a problem. Although, foreign investors from Japan, the US and Germany have shown interest in developing traffic system projects is it estimated that up to $6 billion will be needed in Ho Chi Minh City alone.

Nguyen Xuan Thuy of the Institute for Traffic Planning has issued the following warning:

> *All the measures currently combined would be inadequate in addressing the problems in the cities. The only solution is to build an underground transport network in each city. A metro would help to solve the problem of congestion , pollution and transport volumes. In the long run, it would be it would be cheaper to build a metro system , rather than trying to take reactive measures to fix traffic hot-spots as they arise.*

Meanwhile, the traffic situation, once thought of as a "dream" has turned into a nightmare.